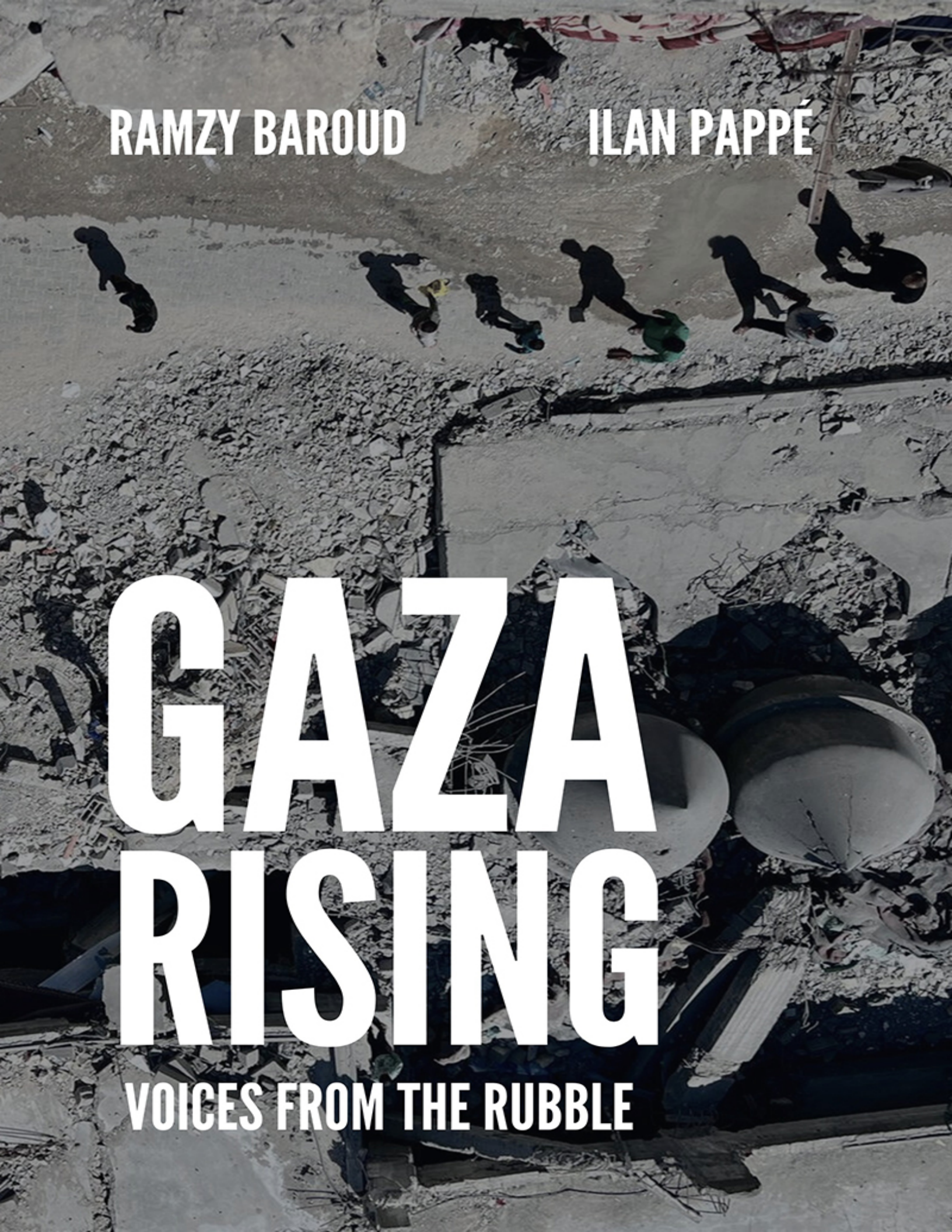
RAMZY BAROUD
ILAN PAPPÉ
GAZA RISING
VOICES FROM THE RUBBLE

Praise for

GAZA RISING

Voices from the Rubble

"A stunning collection of exceptional writing—by turns poetic, painful and precise—but always beautifully, universally, human. The Gazan writers in this gem of a collection are creating literature at the highest level."

HANAN KATTAN, Author, *Palestine Revealed*

"When genocide is the project, the targets of that genocide remind us—indeed they keep us from forgetting—that their very acts of living are acts of resistance. The stories gathered here speak from the heart of Palestinian defiance and remind us of this truth, which is being tested like never before. If the people in these stories are heroic—and I believe they are—then this is a book of heroes. And of villains with many more weapons than souls among them."

RON JACOBS, U.S. Author, *Daydream Sunset: Sixties Counterculture in the Seventies*

"*Gaza Rising* is a collection of stories like no other. Each story is explicitly unique, but one character is present throughout them all, and that is the city of Gaza. The-brick and-mortar protagonist that remains resilient but gentle despite all it has lived through, yearning to embrace its people with open arms, eagerly awaiting to tell its tales of all it has seen and triumphed through.

"Throughout these stories you realize Gaza is not just a homeland, it is a breathing, living, vocal character with the smell of poetry on its breath.

"These stories offer a view of Gaza I had not found elsewhere. I read many of them through tears, not due to profound sadness, but due to each

writer's willingness to display a piece of their life that could understandably be desired to be kept to themselves. Each story is a love letter to a homeland that has filled these writers with such a palpable pride you feel they had no choice but to tell of all its beauty, even in its hardship."

BOBBY VYLAN, British punk rap artist

More Praise

"*Gaza Rising* provides an invaluable insight, enabling the reader to finally comprehend the indomitable steadfastness of a people, who, despite their geographical constraints, size and material predicament, have become the beating heart of global change."

ROBERT INLAKESH, Prominent Expert on Palestine and the Middle East

"In a period marked by colonialist 'Board of Peace' blueprints, western commentators impose routine silencing and already refer to the 'conflict' in the past-tense, implying that Gaza's stitch-up by imperialists and their regional allies is a done deal. In *Gaza Rising*, Ramzy Baroud and Ilan Pappé show painstakingly that the incremental genocide upon Gaza continues into the bloody present. But, as the contributors to this book demonstrate with vibrant clarity, the story does not end there. The 'origins of defiance' to which Baroud refers in his introduction shows that, despite murder, expulsion, destruction, starvation, internment, torture, and all manner of colonial Zionist weaponry, the mission of liquidating the resistant culture of Palestine continues to flounder.

"This is not another book about the people of Gaza, told on their behalf. This is their testament to the will to not merely survive, but to celebrate their own communal endurance. Curated in this essential collection of grassroots narratives, the reader will find dozens of references to the fragile joys of life despite it all. The chapters of this book were not written in

heated offices or in places of relative comfort. They were composed in Gaza, the frontline and compass of humanity, in flooded tents, demolished buildings, and rubble, under total blockade. From doctors to animal carers, lovers and resistance organisers, the steadfast ‘audacity and courage’ of the people of Gaza pours from every page. Their words should inspire us all to fight alongside them for a new world.”

Dr. LOUIS BREHONY, British author, editor of *Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings*

GAZA RISING
VOICES FROM THE RUBBLE

Ramzy Baroud | Ilan Pappé
EDITORS

Clarity Press, Inc.

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ISBN: 978-1-963892-06-2
EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-963892-07-9

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2026931224

Clarity Press, Inc.
2625 Piedmont Rd. NE, Ste. 56
Atlanta, GA 30324, USA
https://www.claritypress.com

To the memory of Dr. Soma Baroud, and to the eternal spirit of the Gaza Martyrs.

—Ramzy Baroud

To Wissam Hamada, whom I met in Denmark and realized once more that Gaza will rise.

—Ilan Pappé

Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK STANDS as a testament to the patience, tenacity, and sacrifices of its contributors: Soma, Abu Kan'an, Hani, Reem, Rasheed, Munia, Amna, Shaimaa, Maphaz, Asia, Bashaer, and Lamia. Entrusting us with their profound experiences at the height of the Israeli genocide in Gaza was a monumental task—one that took an immense physical and emotional toll.

We honor the sacrifices of those who did not live to see their words reach the world. To their soaring spirits, we offer our eternal gratitude and love.

To our families, whose unwavering love and patience sustained us through the most grueling period of our careers, we remain deeply indebted.

We are particularly grateful to Romana Rubeo, the anchor of this project, whose fierce dedication and patience kept this work alive and the workflow moving forward.

To those who refined and engaged with the text—Naomi Labis, Ben Boulton, and Dr. Blake Alcott—we extend our sincerest appreciation.

A special thank you to our dear friend, Dr. Louis Brehony, for his indispensable assistance with logistics, editing, translation, and his direct contributions to the narrative.

Our gratitude extends to all who supported us throughout the production of this text: Bouna Mbaye, Robert Inlakesh, Nurah Tapeh-Sallie, Sylvia Fernandes Mello, Wafaa Aludaini (martyred in the genocide), Dr. Zarefah Baroud, Munia Jamal, Claude Zurbach, Sami al-Arian, Samaa Abu Sharar, John Harvey, and Dan Kovalik.

Two distinguished scholars were vital to the realization of this book: Professor Richard Falk, former UN Special Rapporteur for Palestine, whose afterword provides a masterly conceptualization of the text; and Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu, former Prime Minister of Türkiye, whose

philosophically framed Coda invites the reader into a space of deep introspection.

Finally, we offer a heartfelt thank you to Clarity Press publisher Diana Collier. Her constant support not only made this project a reality but ensured it was presented in its most powerful form under these impossibly harrowing circumstances.

To all of them, and the many others who stood with us, we are profoundly appreciative.

We hope this collective work leaves readers with more than knowledge —that it offers the enduring hope that the future, held in the hands of these Palestinian intellectuals, remains resolute and secure.

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Ilan Pappé

Preface

WHEN YOU ARE, like the Palestinians, on the receiving end of a settler-colonial project such as Zionism, one of the worst aspects of this encounter is the dehumanization you endure.

This dehumanization is felt on several levels and with different degrees of severity, whether experienced individually or collectively.

Collectively, dehumanization is as old as the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict, and it has manifested primarily through denial. When early discussions in Europe took place about the future of Ottoman Palestine, Palestinians were invisible. They were never included in the deliberations over their homeland's future.

This trend has continued throughout history and continues today. In current conversations about the "day after," Palestinians are once again excluded from discussions about their future.

On an individual level, denial is a double crime. Those who are harmed become victims twice: first when the crime is committed, and again when it is denied. This has been the Palestinian experience since 1948. The denial of the 1948 ethnic cleansing—the Nakba—was as painful and destructive as the ethnic cleansing itself.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Gaza Strip. Nearly seventy percent of the population there are descendants of refugees expelled by Israel into a space that later became a vast refugee camp, since forcing them into Egypt was impossible.

Many were expelled from villages near what is now the Strip—villages on whose ruins some of the Israeli settlements attacked on October 7, 2023

were later built.

In 2018, during a peaceful march near the fence encircling Gaza—transforming it into a mega-prison—Palestinians demanded their right of return. The response was Israeli snipers shooting at anyone who approached the fence. That march was intended not only as a call for return but also as a demand to end the inhuman siege imposed since 2006. Once more, the Palestinians experienced dehumanization, both through Israeli violence and through the world's indifference to it—and, more importantly, both remained deaf to warnings that incarcerating nearly two million people simply because of who they are, rather than what they did, would not be tolerated forever.

In 2021, the Hamas government issued a warning that the siege would be challenged and that Palestinians in Gaza would not remain passive in the face of intensified Israeli killings in the West Bank and brutal settler attacks on Palestinian communities.

Finally, it was clear that Israel had crossed every red line in its desecration of Haram al-Sharif and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

The response to this layered inhumanity was the Palestinian insistence that humanity must prevail—even under the most inhuman conditions. When non-violent methods and measured armed struggle failed to end the occupation—and especially the siege of Gaza—the next attempt was inevitably far more furious, violent, and at times beyond the control of those who initiated it.

People often ask: had those who initiated the attack on October 7, 2023 known the scale of the Israeli genocidal response, would they still have launched it? Would they have preferred to remain victims of incremental genocide—or to resist, even at the risk of provoking its escalation into full genocide?

No human being should be forced to confront such choices. And in truth, no one could have anticipated the extent of the open genocide that was Israel's reaction. But with hindsight—and with a clearer understanding

of the ideology driving Israel's current political and military elite—this brutality becomes less surprising.

With time, and with more available information, it became possible to demonstrate convincingly that Israel's response to October 7 was not merely revenge or "self-defense," but an attempt to seize what the current leadership viewed as a rare opportunity to complete another stage of the still-unfinished 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

The inferno in Gaza was ignited by a desire to eliminate Palestinians as a people, a nation, and a homeland.

This eliminatory zeal was felt by every person in Gaza. It manifested first and foremost in mass killing—sometimes of entire families—in the wounding of hundreds of thousands, in trauma inflicted upon over two million people, in the displacement of most of the population, and in the destruction of all infrastructure around them.

Yet, as in previous moments of large-scale elimination—and throughout the periods of incremental or localized attempts—Palestinians remained committed to resilience, to *Sumud*. They understood that what mattered was not military victory but the ability to remain, to live, and to dream of a future.

This collection is the story of individual struggles to remain human in the face of total inhumanity. A struggle that, in the case of Dr. Soma Baroud, continued until the very last minute before she was murdered by Israeli bombers. A second-generation victim of Israeli inhumanity—with far more options to escape than her mother had in 1948—she nonetheless chose to risk her life by remaining and continuing to nurse and heal everyone else until her last breath.

Each individual has his or her own way of coping, and we are fortunate that these contributors chose to share theirs with us in this collection. Whether it is through the humorous cynicism of Hani El Salmy, or through the opposite approach: the innocent eyes of children. Like him, contributor Lamia Othman regards children as a source of hope through whom to find an imagined or real way out of this cartography of disaster.

However, when we look at the resilience shown by the people sharing their stories here, there seems to be a common factor: the miracle of the will to survive, which we learn transpires through the power of the word, the story, and recollection. This inspires dignity, hope, and faith in humanity even in the very midst of genocide. This is what saved Reem Hamdaqa in the most difficult existential moments, amid the bombs and shells blasting around her and her family.

The will to remain human in the face of inhumanity accompanies the wish to pursue normal life and emotions in an impossible reality. This is why Rasheed Anbar refused to neglect or overlook the suffering of animals during the genocide, sustaining an incredible project he founded and maintained.

And that craving for normality eventually sent Munia Jamal outside the inferno—but not mentally. Leaving the family behind, with almost certain knowledge of death and destruction, brings on another form of suffering—which she confronted by her resilience and by the power of words.

Words also allow metaphor and imagination—beautifully interwoven in the contribution by Amna Shabana—to craft a sanctuary in the face of the calamity surrounding her and her loved ones.

And since Israel disallowed journalists into the Gaza killing field, it was locals such as Shaimaa Eid who became the voice of the people, conveying in a very graphic and harrowing way—as was called for—the worst form of dehumanization inflicted on the people of Gaza and, yes, exposing the almost impossible ways people struggled against it.

Reporting and speaking against it is not only a huge task from within the Strip, but—as we learn from Mahfaz Yousef—from outside it as well, where resilience means insisting on the right to report, to tell, and to accuse.

How people remain resilient and still cling to life and hope is a question almost impossible to fathom when reading the contributions of Asia al-Masouabi and Bashaer Abu Ma'amar. Palestinian women—from the days of the Nakba throughout the ongoing Nakba until today in Gaza—one after the other, showed this incredible impulse for life, even when family,

friends, and loved ones were killed around them, their houses disappeared, and their places of living became graveyards of careers, hopes, and ultimately, life.

Finally, Abu Kan'an, shows the power of words to set records right, to rectify false perceptions and prejudices. With his help, we receive a clearer, more nuanced picture of the nature of the resistance in Gaza. It is not all Hamas, he tells us. It is the DNA of a population that, over decades—and some would say over centuries—did not succumb to expulsion, colonization, and oppression. A history of resilience that will ensure that Gaza will rise once more.

Ramzy Baroud

Introduction

Gaza Rising: Revolutionary Love in the Shadow of Genocide

> *"At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality."*
> —Che Guevara

THE ISRAELI genocide in Gaza was not a conflict that started as a war and gradually evolved; it was conceived and executed, unequivocally, as an intended genocide.

The current scale of violence, therefore, reveals no incremental progression in the degree of bloodletting. It is, instead, a centralized political decision: purposeful, calculated, and bloodier than any other period in Palestinian history, far surpassing even the standards of previous wars on Gaza. This unprecedented brutality raises a critical question: Did the events of October 7, 2023[1]—the Palestinian Resistance military operation targeting the Israeli army's Southern Command, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,200 soldiers and civilians and the capture of over two hundred people—cause a fundamental shift in Israeli policy, or did it merely accelerate its standing eliminationist goals?

The common wisdom suggests that the sheer scale and boldness of the Palestinian attack, coupled with the unprecedentedly high number of Israeli casualties, compelled a fundamental change in Israeli behavior. This narrative posits that, faced with such a profound breach by the very people they had viewed as fully subjugated by the Gaza siege and periodic destructive wars, Israel had no choice but to respond harshly in order to resume control and order, thus characterizing the ensuing war and genocide in Gaza as a direct, reactive measure. However, this assumption is fundamentally untrue. As my mentor and co-editor of this anthology, Professor Ilan Pappé, recently wrote in the *New Internationalist*, the Israeli state, due to historical circumstances beyond its control, has always labored to come up with a "concrete narrative and a discourse" that might successfully "justify its eliminatory policies" in Palestine, regardless of the numerous massacres carried out against Palestinians.[2]

The degree of Israeli violence inflicted on the Palestinians has been managed from its very start, following the ethnic cleansing in 1948 known as the Nakba.[3] The state ensured that the severity of its actions on the ground never exceeded the capacity of its language to justify them. While many events in Palestinian history, starting with the Nakba, legally deserve the term genocide, a different strategy was employed in the interim. Between these defining episodes—the Naksa (the war and occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza in 1967)[4] and the major wars on Gaza (2008–2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021)[5]—Israel resorted to incremental genocide.

Incremental genocide is the process of achieving the systematic elimination of a people without concentrating the action into a single, comprehensive event that could be legally labeled as genocide. It allows for the gradual slaughter of a large section of the population and maintenance of the desire to ethnically cleanse survivors, a process Israel has carried out in Gaza over two decades. However, that cautious paradigm was already shifting before October 7. As Pappé argued: "Over the years, this smokescreen became thinner as Israeli authorities escalated their eliminatory actions, and thus the number of Palestinians killed by Israel

grew exponentially. From an attempt to hide the real intentions behind the Zionist project, over time, these intentions were proudly broadcast first internally and then to the world at large."[6]

Gaza has historically served as the testing ground for this Israeli experiment. The goal was to escalate violence and send a clear message to the entirety of the Palestinian people: resistance cannot be tolerated. The only option available to millions of oppressed, occupied, and collectively incarcerated people was utter and absolute submission to the Israeli-imposed reality. Gaza has always been the crucible for this strategy. Yet, out of this extreme violence, something else was forged: The Origins of Defiance.

The Origins of Defiance

This violent trajectory began at the very start, when Israel declared itself a state on May 14, 1948, over the corpses of Palestinians and the traces of their burned towns and villages. Nearly 800,000 Palestinians—two-thirds of the overall population of Palestine—were expelled from their ancestral homes.[7] That mass of people, injured, penniless, and disoriented, ran in every possible direction. Those in the north escaped to Syria and Lebanon; others fled to Jordan. Many also fled by sea in small, makeshift fishing boats; many of these capsized, turning their bid for freedom into a watery grave. Hundreds of thousands more became refugees in their own historic homeland.

This is how the Gaza Strip inherited its refugee crisis. A small area, once belonging to the Gaza District and home to city dwellers and nomadic tribes, became rife with well over 200,000 refugees.[8] They were driven under the weight of barrel bombs and massacres, arriving with only the tattered clothes on their backs. This ushered in the age of suffering that continues to this very day.

Following that war and the demarcation of the armistice lines, Gaza remained under Egyptian administrative and military control, while the West Bank and East Jerusalem were under Jordanian control. Numerous Israeli army raids targeted Gaza, forcing the newly established Strip's

refugees to organize and fight back. These small groups of fighters became known as the *Fedayyeen*.[9] These freedom fighters banded together without either ideology or a concrete grasp of the geopolitical forces that were changing the fate of the ancient Palestinian nation. They were the very peasants, *fellahin*, who had been expelled from their land during the Nakba, driven only by the desire to go back.

The Israeli raids on Gaza, which killed numerous civilians, were officially phrased as Israel's quest to defend itself from the hordes of *mukharibeen*—troublemakers and saboteurs. This was their term for the indigenous population of Palestine, who simply fought to defend whatever territorial spaces and population remained in the homeland. The pattern that continued was relentless: Israeli raids, incursions, massacres, territorial expansion, and the illegal settlement of Jews on newly conquered land. All of this was met with Palestinian *sumud*—steadfastness, defiance, and resistance.

This process, repeating itself over nearly eight decades, has made Gaza what it is today: the most extreme example of Israeli violence, on one hand, and the beating heart of Palestinian resistance on the other. Though unwittingly, Israel has created its own nightmare in Gaza. Every violent act was met with greater Palestinian mobilization, popular resistance, and a defiance-centered discourse that always managed to defeat every Israeli attempt at eliminating the supposed threat of Gaza. This Palestinian defiance was immortalized by the iconic Gaza poet Muin Bseiso, who declared the persistence of this unbroken will: "I have not died! I still call you from behind the wounds."

The Bulldozer and the Sea

Israel was always aware of the fundamental dichotomy: defeating a nation that seemed eternally immune to defeat. In 1971, Ariel Sharon, then head of the army's Southern Command (and later Prime Minister), became one of the first generals to invest in the wholesale destruction of Gaza. He developed the "Sharon Fingers"[10]: military incursions and settlements that sliced into refugee camps and residential areas, creating narrow corridors to

divide and weaken the population. To dismember Gaza, Sharon went on a killing and destruction spree across the Strip, earning the nickname the Bulldozer.[11] His victims included numerous refugees and thousands of Bedouins who were ethnically cleansed into Sinai and other areas. While such wholesale targeting occurred elsewhere in occupied Palestine, Gaza was and remains the archetype of incremental genocide.

Yet, Gaza always emerged, licking its wounds, yet fiercely alive. The population remained ready to fight back, convinced of an imminent victory despite impossible obstacles and immensely disproportionate power. While Israel succeeded, from its perspective, in dehumanizing Gaza, the Strip's humanity was ever more accentuated. Under the most difficult circumstances, the population managed to forge a strong community. The socio-economic divisions that followed the Nakba slowly dissipated. Though never fully erased, the relationship between the original inhabitants, the city-dwellers, the Bedouins, and the refugees grew stronger over the years. The very Israeli tactics meant to weaken these bonds only enforced the desperate need for unity. They grew stronger.

The cruel desire of Yitzhak Rabin—the former Israeli Prime Minister—who famously wished to wake up one morning to find Gaza swallowed by the sea,[12] is part of Gaza's permanent narrative. The sea, however, did not submerge Gaza. Instead, it continued to be its lifeline, often its last chance at survival.

I grew up in Gaza and vividly remember the day, during the early period of the Palestinian Intifada (the 1987 uprising),[13] that Israel prevented us from reaching the sea. It was there that we entrusted our grief to the salty, blue water. It was there we watched fishermen disappear briefly and return with bounty, cheered by colleagues and children, who perhaps didn't fully comprehend that each catch meant the guaranteed survival of a family. That salvation—that very sea in which Rabin wished to drown us all—was often stolen away, made forbidden by Israeli military orders.

Banning the sea from Gaza was a frequently used act of collective punishment, as was cutting off water and electricity, limiting movement,

and the draconian closures that collectively incarcerated the whole population in 141 square miles (365 square kilometers). This small, overcrowded space shrank even further over the years. Land was taken for illegally built settlements and roads designated as “Jewish only.” More land was appropriated for military “buffer zones,” robbing Gaza of its already tiny agricultural areas in the east.

The aim was always total control over Gaza—to keep the Strip at the brink of famine, viewed merely as a political tactic. This is not my interpretation, but the explicit words of Dov Weissglas, former senior advisor to Ariel Sharon. He stated the siege was not meant to kill Gazans but to put them on a “diet.”[14] The specifics of that “diet” were later leaked: the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported on December 20, 2012 that Israel was meticulously counting the calories required for the Gaza population to merely survive.

Unbreakable

Yet, Israel failed. In 2005, the Israeli army evacuated 8,000 settlers and dismantled 21 settlements.[15] This was not a relinquishing of control over the Strip, but the realization that Gazans cannot be tamed, subdued, or broken. The Israeli army changed its mission: instead of controlling the population from within, it controlled the lives of Gazans from without. Israeli snipers from Southern Command units besieged the eastern borders through the remaining buffer zones. The Israeli Navy set siege to the Gaza sea and its fishermen. The Israeli Air Force controlled the sky. These mechanisms of control enforced the hermetic Gaza siege, interrupted only by major wars that killed and wounded tens of thousands of Palestinians following Sharon’s redeployment.[16]

The purpose of these wars became known in Israeli military lingo as “mowing the grass”[17]—ensuring that any Palestinian attempt at resistance was crushed during its formation. Even occasional daring Palestinian operations did not deter Israel; rather, they served as further justification for more wars and a tighter siege. These acts, in turn, served as harsh reminders to the occupied West Bank that resistance would not be tolerated. For

Israel, the definition of resistance did not merely include Palestinian homemade rockets or guns. Even the Great March of Return,[18] Gaza's largest consistent act of nonviolent popular mobilization, was dealt with as an act of war, demonstrating the fruitlessness of attempting any Ghandian process of *satyagraha*. The weekly marches, reaching their zenith every Friday (starting March 30, 2018, and lasting over 18 months), led to the killing of 214 people, including 46 children, and the wounding of 36,100, including nearly 8,800 children.

Gazans had hoped that shifting to less militant approaches would force Israel, under international pressure, to end or ease the hermetic siege. The blockade had already killed countless Palestinians and left Gaza without clean water and barely functioning hospitals. The United Nations reported in 2015 that Gaza would be unlivable by 2020.[19] Even then, the international community, beholden to U.S. political agendas, did little. Gaza continued to teeter between the despair of reality and hope rooted in its own faith and communal experience. Gaza was the very manifestation of Antonio Gramsci's profound reference to the "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." Though besieged, the population explored every margin at their disposal, determined not merely to survive but to flourish.

Due to my work as the editor of the *Palestine Chronicle*, I commissioned numerous reports about the everyday life of Gaza under siege. The people of the Strip referred to the Israeli redeployment from the Strip as liberation. Not that they weren't fully aware of the deadly siege and occasional deadly war, but here they meant the liberation of the small margins of everyday life. They exploited these caveats to the maximum. Cultural events were an everyday occurrence—not only in main cities like Gaza and Khan Younis, but in every refugee camp and neighborhood. This included poetry recitations, book launches, traditional dancing (Dabka) competitions, and sports events that welcomed all groups and genders, even marathons. Though the Strip lacks a continuous course for the 26.2-mile marathon, runners would zigzag between the humble dwellings of refugee camps, running in seemingly endless circles to cover the required distance. Yet, nothing diminished the runners' joy or the celebration of their

achievements. Gaza, known for its tragedy, was fighting to assert its very humanity.

The latest genocide on Gaza[20] seemed to be the ultimate final act, now intensified by an Israeli spirit of vengeance, their last desperate attempt at destroying the seemingly indestructible spirit of the population. “Human animals,” declared Yoav Gallant, former Israeli Defense Minister. Other Israeli leaders made their intentions clear, including Isaac Herzog, who said, “there are no innocent people in Gaza,” and Amichai Eliyahu, who wished to “drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza.” It was clear that Israel’s problem was not confined to a single group—whether Hamas, Islamic Jihad, or the socialist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Although these groups championed armed resistance, Israel’s real enemy was the people themselves.

These were the people who insisted on remaining in Gaza, even when faced with imminent death from genocide, famine, or disease. They continued to pray for God’s mercy near their ruined mosques, refused to surrender hope when their entire families perished, or used the rubble of their destroyed homes to practice parkour. While the war appeared to be between Israel and Palestinian resistance groups, it was in actuality a war launched by Israel against the Palestinian people, their pride, dignity, faith, history, belonging, community, and very identity. Israel wanted to restore an old paradigm: controlling not just every aspect of life in Gaza, but the very psyche and soul of every Gazan. They sought to instill fear, impose servitude, and remind Palestinians of their place—that of lesser beings, with worthless lives and no agency, as devised in the Israeli mind.

Yet, ironically, it was agency that saved Palestinians from total destruction. That very agency allowed them to survive the scourges of a genocide unparalleled in modern history. They survived not only by repelling Israeli military advancements (a factor that entirely changed the rules of the “mowing the grass” game) but because they refused to relinquish their humanity. They clung to their love for one another, their deep spirituality and faith, their artistic expressions, and even their sense of humor. In the hands of Gazan social media influencers, this humor became

an expression of power over the Israeli army's death machine. In short, Gaza transformed *sumud* into an actual, tangible strategy. It was no longer a sentiment or an academic notion of long-term survival. It became real and immediate, conquering the supposedly unconquerable Merkava tank and responding to genocidal intent with the confidence of a nation that had entered into a pact not to surrender under any circumstance.

Rising Spirit

This volume is a testament to that spirit. The contributions contained here are not just narratives of war, but of personal agency—an hourly fight against despair. They chronicle clinging to hope, faith, and family, alongside the creative, mental ways of surviving extermination. These essays were written during the war. They often arrived in a few lines, whenever the internet or electricity allowed. Tragically, some who initially committed to the project were killed alongside their families. This included Wafaa Aludaini, a Palestinian journalist (killed with her family in September 2024), and my sister, Dr. Soma Baroud (assassinated in October 2024).[21] Dr. Baroud was highly enthusiastic about the project. Much of her story was communicated in occasional WhatsApp lines. She tried to explain why she stayed in Gaza despite having the option to leave. I hope she forgives me for publishing her text without her final approval; she was keenly detail oriented.

Initially, *Gaza Rising* had been conceived as featuring the visions of Gazan intellectuals, doctors, artists, and professionals on how to rebuild what Israel had destroyed. This was early in the war, based on the assumption that even the bloodiest conflict would not lead to the utter destruction of Gaza and the wholesale killing of a significant percentage of the population. Even though many potential contributors—academics, artists, and political leaders—were killed, wounded, disappeared or forced to leave in the early months of the genocide, we insisted that the title, *Gaza Rising*, must remain unchanged.

The term Rising, therefore, no longer refers to mere rebuilding. It carries a more profound meaning: the ascendance of the spirit of these

unbroken, unbreakable people. The book aims to go deeper than any other work, explaining the war from the viewpoint of ordinary people. It answers critical questions: From where does Gaza draw its collective power? Why do Gazans refuse to leave? What is the role of family, community, and faith in daily survival? Why are Gazans so insistent on self-assertion through writing and art? Ultimately, why will Israel never defeat Gazans?

The essays in this volume are profoundly political. This truth is revealed not through formal political discourses, but in the way Palestinians in Gaza speak of their daily lives and realities. Their words are saturated with resistance, even when the term itself is rarely uttered. They are revolutionary at their core, even if their authors do not claim the label. They are organic intellectuals of the highest caliber, even if some do not assume the role of intellectual in everyday existence. And ultimately, they are all involved in the greatest act of love: that for a homeland whose meaning, especially after the genocide, transcends mere land, air, and water. It has a new meaning that will require many new volumes to even begin to properly understand.

This volume marks only the beginning of the unshakable testaments to the Palestinian spirit that the Israeli genocide could not crush.

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Soma Baroud

A Physician's Final Testimony

When the latest war broke out, Dr. Soma Baroud, having spent thirty years treating the wounds of Gaza, recognized the familiar rhythm of destruction—yet failed to register the absolute finality of this particular violence. The concept of genocide was not a theory concept to her; it was the accumulating weight of history carried by her family, refugees from Beit Daras. As the only daughter, she bore that ancestral memory alongside her stethoscope. She had been both victim and healer across countless conflicts, often dreaming of escape, but bound always by a sense of professional duty and an intractable love for her besieged home. That profound, tensile bond was brutally severed in October 2024 when she was assassinated by the Israeli army. What remains are not simply final reports, but the searing fragments of her last words.

The Last Photograph

I DO NOT KNOW precisely why I came back to Gaza. An inexplicable tug pulled me back to the very place I had yearned to escape for so long. And now, being here again, I reflect on this decision. Was destiny assigning me the role of being perpetually trapped in a place that should feel like home but does not?

I grew up in a simple refugee dwelling in the Nuseirat Refugee Camp. Despite the crushing poverty and my father's relentless struggle—first as a fighter in the Palestine Liberation Army, then a police officer, a carpet

salesman, and finally, in his inflated description, a businessman—I hold many cherished memories of my childhood in Gaza. The beach was my ultimate escape, though as a girl, my connection to the sea's vastness was limited by societal constraints. My mother's exquisite *maftul* and *maqluba*, enjoyed on the sand under the expansive blue sky and sea, gave me an early taste of the freedom we so desperately craved. This freedom, however, was always short-lived, invariably interrupted by the presence of the Israeli military, their arbitrary rules, the ever-present checkpoints, and the countless permits that turned a basic human right—movement—into a difficult task for some and an impossibility for others.

My family hailed from the village of Beit Daras, a place we were told produced the toughest, the most stubborn, and the proudest Palestinians. And this was true: my mother possessed unwavering patience and inner strength, and my father was the very definition of tenacity. A communist, he firmly insisted on me receiving the highest education. He declared, with the support of my mother, that I must become a doctor, at a time when we did not even have money for the cheapest food. He had recently been dismissed from the once Egyptian-run police in Gaza following the *Naksa*, the devastating 1967 war that led to the complete occupation of all of historic Palestine.

I was just a few days old when he declared my future as a doctor. The neighbors chuckled, perhaps mistaking his statement for the fleeting wish of a desperate man. My mother remained silent, as she knew my father "was a man of his word." I still don't fully understand how they managed it, and yet, I became a doctor. The journey from being the child of a penniless family in a Gaza refugee camp to a graduate of the University of Aleppo's college of medicine, a quarter of a century later was neither logical nor merely luck. It was the result of the unyielding spirit of my *fellahin* family, the peasants from Beit Daras, whose forced removal from their homes in 1948 during the *Nakba* denied them the dignity of even owning a small piece of land. Yet, they somehow remained proud *ashab al-ard*—the people of the land—even when landless and stateless.

For us refugees, education was and remains everything. My father scrutinized my homework daily with the focus of a prison warden inspecting inmates. My five brothers can attest to the same. We would tremble as he carefully examined our Arabic writing skills, math problems, map-drawing skills among other subjects. My mother, though illiterate, would stand there, ensuring the daily routine was executed flawlessly. Ah, the immense relief upon passing my father's judgment.

"We have nothing left but our education," he would always say. "It is our weapon, and our pride." I had little real understanding of what this meant. I felt that other things in life mattered besides the constant pressure to be the top student in my class, then my school, and finally, all of Gaza. I desperately wanted new socks and shoes, as mine always had holes. I longed for new clothes, as mine were invariably tattered. I wished to go to the beach without the intrusive stares of others, so that, for once, I could simply be myself.

At the beach, I would lie in a specific position, deliberately limiting my view to the sand, the water, and the sky. I would play a mental game where I pretend that Gaza wasn't behind me. I would imagine that we were not refugees living under military occupation. And the trick would often work, at least for a little while, though eventually, reality would intrude, reminding me that this was a fantasy.

At home, I had my other ways of escaping. I would listen, often secretly, to the music of Abdul Halim Hafiz, despite frequent scoldings for indulging in the flamboyant Egyptian singer's romantic songs. The music of Fairuz transported me, making me feel like a fairy dancing in the forests of Lebanon's mountains. "Ya Hawa ya Hawa . . . take me to my homeland." I never truly knew what my homeland was exactly. My conception of Palestine was based on the endless, often painful memories shared by my grandparents and parents. Their stories of Beit Daras often began with idyllic tales of a simple yet dignified life. Often, they ended badly with the same story: *el-Hijra*, the forced migration, the *Nakba*.

My grandfather, who lived in the refugee camp until his late eighties, subsisted and died without ever accepting that he would never return to his mud-brick home in Beit Daras, and his small plot of land where he cultivated lentils, wheat, and barley. He resided in Nuseirat as if a weary traveler, merely resting before his journey back to his village.

My maternal grandfather had passed away long before my birth. He left behind three sons, all forced out of Palestine by various wars and the occupation, and my mother, who resided in the adjacent Bureij refugee camp. Zarefah might have appeared "simple" to some, but this would have been a profound misjudgment. She possessed complex emotions, a deep capacity for love, and a spirit fractured by a life of hardship and abuse. Only later in life, when I became a mother myself, did I truly grasp the extent of my mother's strength. How could someone be so battered by life, hardship, and loneliness, yet strong and composed enough to raise us on my father's meager, often non-existent, income, and, remarkably, to guide me toward becoming a doctor? Her life was a testament to incredible patience, and her ultimate goal was our safety, at times, mere survival.

When the First *Intifada* erupted in '87, I was no longer in Gaza but in Syria, pursuing my medical degree and fulfilling what I was told was my destiny. Back then, I had attempted to dissuade my parents from pushing me toward what they believed was best for me. I lacked the courage to openly defy them, though at times I hinted at my love for English literature, a subject my uncle Ibrahim, who would later become a professor of English and translation, had pursued. With time, I learned to reconcile my appreciation for translated foreign literature with my dedication to becoming a doctor.

I remained ignorant of my family's situation during the years of the *Intifada*. I would listen to the news on TV and radio, desperately hoping never to hear the name of one of my siblings listed as yet another martyr. What I didn't know was that it was my mother who was to die, or rather, to be killed while I was away.

She had grown increasingly frail over time. Though barely in her early forties, her body had begun to succumb to the weight of grief over lost loved ones, fear for the lives of her sons, and the profound absence of me, her only daughter, for years. I received a brief letter from my father, miraculously finding its way from Gaza to Aleppo, stating that the situation was too dire and that returning to Gaza meant abandoning my education. What was I to do? I missed my family, my mother especially, to the point of deep anguish. My grades were plummeting, and I was failing exams, a stark contrast to my usual top performance.

A year earlier, during a fleeting visit home, as the taxi journeyed from the Rafah crossing, I had meticulously planned a surprise: how should I greet Mom upon arrival? I was filled with anticipation. I instructed the taxi driver not to honk and to drop me off a short distance from home. I tiptoed toward the rusty metal door and gently knocked, hearing my mother's familiar voice, "Who is it?" Without answering, I continued my playful act, this time softly drumming on the door while stifling laughter on the other side. Somehow, she recognized me, letting out an unexpected cry: "Soma!" she called out with absolute certainty. She embraced me and wept uncontrollably, as if she knew it would be the last time she would ever see me.

We sat in the *hakura*, holding onto each other tightly, reluctant to break the embrace. Whenever I thought of her after that, I always recalled her face at that precise moment: gaunt yet beautiful, tear-streaked but with such profound emotion in her eyes. I have spent my entire life striving to emulate her maternal warmth, but it was simply unattainable.

Was it a generational divide? The women of the Nakba generation were forged differently, I concluded after much reflection. They endured uprooting and loss in a way that even my generation, born within the confines of the Gaza prison, couldn't fully comprehend or replicate. When I returned to Gaza the last time, my medical certificate in hand, once again planning a surprise arrival, she was gone, forever. I stumbled upon her death certificate, tears streaming down my face while my expression

remained frozen in disbelief. “Reason of death: soldier’s beating,” the paper stated, certified by the Palestine Red Crescent Hospital in Egypt.

Something within me shattered that day, irrevocably. My entire life since then has felt like a desperate, and ultimately futile, attempt at self-rediscovery. I married a Gaza lawyer who shared my background, even my last name, but often little else in terms of shared perspectives. I only truly grasped the depth of my love for him when he was killed, many years later, by the Israeli army as he stumbled his way into Khan Younis. The guilt that had gnawed at me after my mother’s death was only intensified by the loss of Hamdi, who later became a cherished teacher at a reputable Gaza university. Despite the numerous obstacles, we had built a good life together: a beautiful home in Qarara, east of Khan Younis. My days were divided between the Nasser Hospital and my clinic on the ground floor of our home. He dedicated his time to teaching and writing. Before his murder, he had become the head of the Law School at Al-Azhar University. All of our children received the best education Gaza could offer, and several had ventured beyond the Strip seeking further education and establishing lives elsewhere.

As my life began to find a semblance of stability, I too started contemplating leaving. I was convinced that my sole reason for remaining in Gaza was my family, nothing more. But if my children were forging their own paths, why should I remain in this open-air prison? What is Gaza if not a perpetual state of physical and mental confinement, a siege within a siege?

The most severe of these blockades was imposed in 2007. Since then, our lives have been punctuated by wars and the annual somber commemoration of the siege: one year passed, then two, then ten, and so on. During these years, a significant portion of my career was dedicated to ushering newborns into this world and desperately fighting to keep them alive amidst malnutrition, bullet wounds, shrapnel, and the like. My sanity was preserved by my children, high achievers in their own right, and my community of doctors and nurses, a second family whose bonds were strengthened through shared adversity.

But a breaking point arrived when I had turned sixty. My next chapter, I decided, could not be written in Gaza. I needed respite, a way out, an escape. My feelings of guilt over the persistent notion that Gaza wasn't truly my home were often mitigated by the thought that I had paid my dues in hardship, loss, and suffering, but also in relentless, agonizing work. I had always felt like an old soul, even as a child, chasing the unattainable dream of solitude.

When my father fell ill, my underequipped hospital offered no real solace. Desperate, I tried to secure his transfer out of Gaza to receive better treatment in a Jerusalem hospital, but his history as a former freedom fighter was etched in the Israeli intelligence records, condemning the aging communist to die at home. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which I had read in my teenage years, was one of the few possessions he left behind.

Judging by the worn condition of the pages, it appeared my father had revisited it countless times since then, as if searching for a reflection of himself within its narrative. I inherited that book and have reread it many times since. In my mind, Gaza was akin to the town of Macondo, where history wasn't linear but a recurring loop, repeating its tragic arc for each successive generation. But did it have to be this way? What if I left, never to return?

In the early months of 2023, I resolved to break with a destiny that I had never accepted as my own. With the support of friends and family, I decided to leave everything behind and embark on a new life. I envisioned Turkiye as my initial destination, before settling and eventually passing away from old age as far removed from Gaza as possible. Three of my five children had already established their own families abroad, and my siblings, some of whom I had not seen for years, and even decades, were scattered across the globe. I yearned to see them, to meet their children, and to recount all the hardships I had endured since they left me alone in Gaza all those years ago. I longed to go to the theater, to a fine restaurant, to attend a musical, and a book launch. I wanted to converse about subjects other than the siege and the war, the occupation, the missiles, and the pervasive

hunger. I grew weary of amputating the limbs of young boys and girls and imagined a world in my remaining years where life was possible without pain, without the weight of heavy memories, and without the suffocating feeling of entrapment.

But after a mere two weeks in Izmir, the supposedly boundless possibilities began to shrink, as did the seemingly infinite world around me. Gaza was haunting me, beckoning me back. Hadn't I endured enough? I was in Izmir, yet all I could see, think of, dream of, and feel was Gaza. Just days after signing a year-long lease on my apartment, I was on a flight back to Egypt, undertaking the humiliating journey through the Sinai desert, to await Egyptian permission to re-enter the prison from which I had briefly escaped. As I crossed back into Rafah and settled into the taxi that would take me to Qarara, I eagerly rolled down the window. The salty air of the sea was like the oxygen I had long been deprived of. I felt alive. This time, I entered my own prison by choice.

A few months later, the war began. It was not an ordinary war; it was a systematic process of extermination, a genocide. From the onset of the war, we immediately sensed that this was not just another gruesome but short-lived conflict, often waged at the expense of the Gaza civilian population. Most of the victims arrived at the hospital in bags, dismembered. There was very little we could do. Those who were still alive arrived in horrific conditions. We performed amputations as if we were butchers, not doctors. We made agonizing decisions about who to try to save and who to let succumb to their injuries. I did everything in my power to avoid the bewildered gazes of those who seemed to be asking why they were left to bleed. Soon, we even depleted our supply of the very painkillers that might have eased the process of death.

I no longer possessed any clean white gowns, accepting that my days and nights would be stained with the blood of children, many of whom were delivered into this world by the very hands that would later sign their death certificates. Is this why I came back to Gaza?

Then the hospital itself came under attack, as was, eventually, every clinic and medical center we sought refuge in to salvage as many lives as possible. Over time, we ourselves became the targets and colleagues began to die in large numbers. Some were killed within the hospitals. Some were blown up with their own families. Some were targeted in the streets. Yet, we persisted, time and time again. Though Israel had often targeted doctors and medical staff in previous wars and in its attempts to quell popular uprisings, never did we imagine that we, medical workers, could become primary targets, where hospitals are treated as military encampments, where patients are victimized multiple times, first when they are injured in their homes, and then when they are targeted and killed in the very places where they sought healing.

Yet, an unyielding force propelled me forward, a visceral need to protect my children and every fragile life I had brought into Gaza in my three decades as a doctor. I had to be strong, a fortress against the despair threatening to break us. My husband and our two sons in Gaza had made a heart-wrenching pact: to separate, in a desperate attempt to increase the chances of at least one surviving. Hamdi should have sought refuge beyond Qarara sooner but he reasoned that, given a worsening illness that had stolen his agility, a grim sanctuary within our home offered a better chance of survival than the perilous uncertainty of flight. But when the methodical destruction of our neighborhood began, with a rain of fire from Israeli drones and fighter jets, escape became his only option. His failing body, however, betrayed him. He stumbled, fell, hauled himself upright with immense effort, sought fleeting solace against the jagged remains of a concrete wall, before ultimately being lost within the surging tide of terrified humanity.

Days later, a neighbor, his voice etched with profound sorrow, conveyed the irreparable news: an Israeli quadcopter had struck Hamdi in the head. Amidst the ensuing chaos and the pervasive stench of death, strangers had laid him to rest in an anonymous grave in the Amal neighborhood of Khan Younis.

For months, we dug. I would go to the hospital, try to get water for the kids, find whatever food I could for the boys as they kept looking for their father. They found many bodies, but never his.

While staying with relatives in Nuseirat on June 8, we heard about a joint Israeli-American military operation to free some Israeli captives, an operation that resulted in the deaths of over 270 Palestinians and injuries to nearly 700. The true horror of this event only became apparent when I decided to return to Khan Younis, driven by fear for my children's safety. Arriving in the neighborhood of my childhood, where my parents had lived and where my earliest memories took root, I saw a devastating scene: a multitude of people, mutilated and lifeless, while others reached out with desperate pleas. I froze, the world around me seeming to still. A silent litany of "I am so sorry" escaped my lips as I navigated the endless bodies, living and dead. In that moment of profound stillness, a sense of finality washed over me. It felt as though my purpose had been served, that my return to Gaza was not a choice but an inevitability, a return to my origin, my destiny. Like the cyclical nature of life depicted by Marquez, I understood then that despite our attempts to break free, the pull of our roots, the enduring legacy of our ancestors, ultimately draws us back.

When the news arrived that our home in Qarara had been bombed, disbelief overwhelmed me. I rushed there, heedless of the horrific bombings still echoing around me, desperate to see for myself. As I hurried through the dust-choked road, surrounded by the inferno of burning homes on all sides, my thoughts returned to my mother, particularly the last, haunting memory of her voice screaming my name. Oh, the stories I will share with her when we reunite in heaven. I will voice my endless grievances and hold her hand tightly, begging her to embrace me and make everything right once more.

The house was nothing more than a pile of rubble, yet a small opening remained between two precariously leaning walls. There, amidst the devastation, I slept on an old couch salvaged from the basement. All around me lay the fragments of my entire life, scattered in half-burnt photo albums.

One photograph captured my mother and me on the beach. We hugged and smiled as if nothing in the world could ever shatter that fleeting moment of joy. I gazed at the image for an eternity as the wreckage of our home above me continued to groan and settle, threatening imminent collapse. Yet, I did not leave. I walked to the hospital and back to my makeshift sleeping spot every day. Although I couldn't articulate this to anyone but myself, I knew with unwavering certainty precisely why I had returned to Gaza, and why I would never leave again.

Dr. Soma Baroud was assassinated by the Israeli army when a drone targeted her car on her way from the hospital on October 9, 2024.

Abu Kan'an

My Socialist Paradise

Abu Kan'an was a name forged in fire—the nom-de-guerre of a Palestinian fighter whose political identity was rooted firmly in the socialist movement. Born in southern Gaza, his very existence was defined by repeated displacement: first, the family became refugees following the Naksa, in the devastating 1967 "Setback." Later, they were uprooted again by a cold geopolitical agreement between Israel and Egypt, only to eventually return to Gaza, the place that had become the world's largest open-air prison. Yet, within this squalid existence, Abu Kan'an did not find despair, but an unyielding devotion. He was utterly enamored by Gaza: its defiant people, its early mornings, its shared food, and its deep, ancestral bravery. This devotion led him inevitably to the resistance, where he became a fixture in every uprising and every war. When the most recent, genocidal assault began, Abu Kan'an, the perennial organizer, was back in the trenches. He was the vital center of defeating the chaos: issuing tactical orders, distributing sustenance, and welcoming the desperate tide of refugees fleeing from the north. This essay does not merely recount his actions, but captures a greater truth from the unvarnished, direct witness captured in his own words.

Gaza's Beautiful Mornings

I WAS BORN in the southern part of the Gaza Strip in the early 1980s into a family that had become refugees in 1967. My family's hardship was

compounded when we endured the anguish of displacement yet again. The camp I grew up in was annexed to Egyptian territory under a border demarcation agreement between Egypt and the occupation in the 1980s. Residents of the camp, cut off from their families in Palestinian Rafah, suffered immensely. After bitter negotiations and fierce legal battles between the camp's inhabitants, Egyptian authorities, and the occupation, a settlement was finally reached. This agreement allowed residents to return to Rafah in phases, and our family was among those who returned in 1992, to the newly built Canada Camp in Tel Al-Sultan, in the southern Strip.

I spent my childhood in a Palestinian camp within the Egyptian border, mere meters from the frontier with Palestinian Rafah where my extended family resided. Yet, I always saw Gaza as an integral part of my identity. We lived and felt every detail of the First Intifada that swept through the Strip. We loved Gaza because it entered our memory early. From childhood, questions constantly haunted me: Why were we displaced twice? Why were there dividing borders between members of the same family? And why did the Egyptians suppress protestors in the Egyptian camp simply for sympathizing with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip?

Sorrowful Fortress

These questions became deeply embedded in me, profoundly shaping my character. In my childhood, Gaza, even from afar, seemed like a sorrowful fortress, defiantly unbroken. Every martyr who ascended there was a hero whose story of sacrifice was etched in my mind. When my family and I finally returned to Gaza, I did not realize how deeply attached I was to it, as if it were a part of my very being: its scent, its fragrance, and simple, weathered camp; its kind people, camp school, and school radio that recited the name of a new martyr and a new resistance battle every day.

The tapestry of Gazan life, its intricate details, differs from any other place in the world, a strange spectacle seen nowhere else. After our return, I encountered new realities. There was the constant presence of Zionist oppression: the Israeli occupation's speeding jeeps, known as the *Bor* and the *Shamarkfol*, the undercover army units, and the sting of tear gas

canisters. Yet, intertwined with this hardship were moments of defiant joy: national celebrations, holidays, and the eager anticipation of each dawn, when masked figures from different factions would emerge, to celebrate our people by painting messages on walls. These were the beautiful moments of Gaza's mornings, the walls themselves transformed into a canvas for striking calligraphy, with a vibrant competition among factions displaying national slogans and powerful writings.

Despite the unstable conditions, life continued with a deep sense of solidarity, a vibrant national culture, and athletic events. There was no indication that Gaza would weaken, falter, or retreat in the face of the enemy's attrition. For when I lived in Gaza physically, I understood it was a "special creation," distinct from any other place, one of its secrets known only to those who lived it. Its peculiarity lies in the fact that life in all its forms is synonymous with resistance, defiance, and uprising; there is no contradiction between them. This is how Gaza forged its own stability.

The First Stone

Because of this inherent spirit, Gaza was the first to act. Jabaliya refugee camp was the first to fire the bullet and hurl the stone; from it, the spark of the First Intifada ignited. With resistance embedded within its very way of life, Gaza refused to allow anyone to precede it in this initiative, this badge of honor. Even when the Palestinian Authority arrived, and we observed discord between its supporters and those who refused it, Gaza maintained its unique revolutionary state. This later led to the Authority's marginalization in favor of the Hamas movement. Despite these contradictions, Gaza continued to forge its unique lifestyle of national mobilization and incitement to all forms of resistance against the occupation.

Despite the impact of repeated aggressions and wars, of division and economic and existential blockades, Gaza's essence remained untouched. It continued to develop its resistance capabilities within an environment diverse in ideas, traditions, and factions. This created Gaza's distinct character; despite some internal issues, it maintained unity under the banner

of resistance. Within this context and reality, I joined the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, an expression of my personality, identity, and national and international program. The writings of the martyred author Ghassan Kanafani, the speeches of the late Dr. George Habash, and the revolutionary spirit of Wadih Haddad profoundly shaped my character.

It was in this revolutionary state, with its complexities, sorrows, hopes, and its military and national mobilization, that I grew up.

Unyielding

Repeated wars, restrictions, and siege did not deter Gaza from building its urban landscape, advancing and developing its resistance capabilities, narrowing the space for political disagreements, and inflicting pain and damage upon the enemy. Even after the enemy withdrew in 2005, Gaza continued to plague it. While there was a vibrant cultural scene in Gaza with theater, arts, and dabke, the overarching narrative, dominated by wars and aggression, overshadowed all activities. Political events and seminars, in all their manifestations and complexities, with the participation of all factions, became dominant.

Gaza's reality also profoundly shaped its cultural landscape; cultural centers operated continuously, engaging in a steady stream of activities, alongside ongoing political activities, sit-ins, and demonstrations. Factions, especially Hamas, Fatah, the PFLP, and Islamic Jihad, competed in commemorating their founding anniversaries by mobilizing in public squares—a message of their membership size, influence, and weight within Gaza, with all faction leaders present in the front rows.

Furthermore, weekly solidarity events with prisoners continued in front of the Red Cross headquarters. Even during the harshest and most brutal wars, Gazans participated deeply in these events, shared by all factions. Pictures of prisoner leaders and martyrs of the prisoner movement adorned the walls of the Red Cross headquarters. Gazans also consistently followed and celebrated all international and religious occasions, reserving the same fervor for the Prophet's birthday as for Valentine's Day, as well as environmental and children's events.

Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque are deeply rooted in the Gazan consciousness. On entering any home in the Gaza Strip, you will find a picture of Al-Aqsa Mosque or the Old City of Al-Quds on one of the walls —an obligatory legacy passed down from one generation to the next. Despite some contradictions that have dominated Gaza in recent years, these seemed secondary and did not impede the Gazans' way of life, their vitality and effectiveness, or their dedication to study and academic achievement. Indeed, everyone is surprised by the sheer number of postgraduate and doctoral degree holders in the Gaza Strip, a trend not limited to traditional intellectuals but including ordinary individuals who saw education and obtaining an academic degree as a form of resistance.

Despite all forms of restrictions affecting various aspects of life, the significant rise in university fees, the harsh effects of the siege that impacted all facets of life—in addition to the Authority's withholding of salaries and allocations, and the deterioration of infrastructure due to repeated wars in Gaza—Gazans neither retreated nor ceased their scientific and academic pursuits. Students and researchers continued to defy all difficulties, considering education and academic persistence as a true form of resistance that would protect national identity and build the future of later generations.

Islamic, Marxist

Gaza's society is a very small yet incredibly diverse community in terms of mentalities, ideas, and degrees of affiliation with national and Islamic factions and their programs. Amidst this diversity, Gaza astonishes us with its ability to embrace all of this within a single environment, capable of life despite every hardship.

As for the contours of life in Gaza and the severe blockade imposed on it for many years, Gaza's location on the seashore partly explains its lifestyle. The sea is the only open area, given the closed borders and crossings. To the same extent that Gazans cared about the urban development of the coastal area, with the spread of hotels, chalets, and modern, beautiful constructions, they also cared about building military

sites, as if it were an essential link in the Gazan psyche. Within these traditions, Gaza created its own Riviera, competing with the French Riviera, and repeatedly rebuilt it—once, twice, thrice—after each war it experienced from 2008 until the war and genocide of October 7, 2023.

During this period, even as Gaza lost its most beautiful landmarks and intellectual and academic treasures, it also developed an explosive device that shattered the legend of the Merkava tank, which then enabled local national military industries to miraculously advance and work towards breaking the siege. From the borders of Rafah, Gaza began building tunnels that became underground cities, one of the most important forms of harming the enemy and breaking the siege.

The ability of the Gazan people to innovate and create has not only manifested in the fields of culture and science, surprising everyone with its students and thinkers reaching high ranks and even working at NASA, but also in their ability to confront the siege with creative, bold, and courageous resistance methods.

Despite the exorbitant human and social costs, Gaza etched this period in history in golden letters with the “Return Marches,” which served as a cry from the people of Gaza against the occupation and all tools of the siege. The marches were a prelude to the greater battle: the battle of October 7.

There are no mysterious secrets or complex reasons behind Gaza’s resistant character, nor to its ability to create a creative human and resistant blend. Rather, it is a primary characteristic present in the genes of the Gazan: the refugee, the tormented, the displaced, the exhausted, the besieged. You cannot find it in any other human being, even from within the same stolen homeland; experience has forged the Gazan into a resilient human being, capable of absorbing shocks.

Here, we do not say that Gaza is a “legend” so as not to do injustice to the “Palestinian citizen in Gaza,” but rather that it has shaped a simple human being who has accumulated experience and absorbed pain in an admirable and astonishing way that has formed the features of their

personality. Even in its difference from other areas of the homeland, Gaza has been distinguished by its ability to absorb discord and contradictions, which are not only explained by political thought but by differences in lifestyle: whether Islamic, liberal, secular, or Marxist, etc.

A Point of Convergence

Despite Hamas' rule giving rise to some criticism and confrontations here and there, it cannot be said that this created a major division in Gazan society that halted the cycle of life or dragged us into an endless spiral of repercussions. Despite the severity of this bitter division, Gaza adapted to this reality within certain limits, which cannot be described as entirely positive or negative. However, it maintained a point of convergence on certain issues that the resistance project, its program, and its choice had neglected. It is rare to find a Gazan who shies away from resistance; rather, they always pride themselves on its operations, even if they disagree with another faction.

What distinguishes a Gazan household—and my own, for example—is that it includes members of the PFLP, Hamas, and Fatah under one roof. This has helped limit contradictions that might affect our public life. Within this reality came the view of the events of October 7, with all its manifestations and repercussions. Despite the reverberations and repercussions of the war on some opinions and ideas, and criticisms here and there, these were not arrows aimed at the essence of resistance, but rather at some miscalculations and erroneous estimations, or due to the circumstances of the war and its catastrophic repercussions on the Gazan citizen, who was subjected to an immense pressure unprecedented in modern history.

Our people in Gaza have experienced massacres and genocide unparalleled in their brutality, criminality, and forms. More dangerously, over one and a half million people were forced to displace to the south, and then this displacement was repeated from one place to another, amidst comprehensive destruction of all their homes and possessions. The Gazan is a person proud of their land, home, and garden, and therefore the

destruction and bombing of all of that was among the most severe experiences during the October 7 war.

As a result of the diverse and distinct Gazan fabric, reactions to this reality were also varied. Among those who criticize the resistance's calculations and estimations—and they are many, especially from certain cultural strata—you find that these same individuals, along with the vast majority of Gazans, follow with great pride and admiration via radio or television screen (powered by solar energy or batteries due to power outages) the qualitative operations of the resistance.

Therefore, resistance in Gaza has remained and continues to be beyond dispute and cannot be considered a point of contention. But if a disagreement exists, it is about the management of the battle or about party affiliation, and this plays a role in directing public opinion and reactions. But Gaza, by its way of life and the genes formed within it, has made the Gazans belong to the reality of resistance and put themselves at its service, responding to its instructions, regardless of the state of discord, differing programs, and division, which sometimes lead to reactions and exceeding reasonable limits.

Despite the harshness and complexities of reality, the resistance in Gaza forged its humanity and programs, and was never far from the concerns of the people; rather, it was part of their societal fabric. Day by day, the resistant faction transformed into a social and humanitarian institution in every sense of the word, compensating for the Authority's shortcomings or its withholding of salaries for martyrs' and prisoners' families. In exchange for military development, it allocated solidarity budgets for martyrs' families, salaries for the injured and wounded, and even support for small projects. Despite limited resources, the resistance created a partnership with society, and this is one of the secrets of its deep connection to Gaza. Also, the resistance, within its ideology, programs, and regulations, prevented fighters who were the sole support of their family from carrying out martyrdom or dangerous operations, to preserve their life and to be a resource for their family. All resistance factions agree on this principle.

Gaza is also rich and filled with specialists who have academic, humanitarian, medical, and scientific expertise. In times of disaster, every individual, every intellectual, turns into a soldier in the battle of the Palestinian narrative. The Gazan has even become a journalist, a media professional, and a conveyor of events, creating a resistant media society that embody image, word, and event, which was clearly and more prominently demonstrated during the battle of October 7. This was a qualitative addition to Gazan journalists and media professionals, who were distinguished by their boldness and accuracy, and therefore were subjected to the largest massacre of journalists and media in modern history.

A New Form of Resistance

I was politically affiliated as a fighter and cadre in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, believing that resistance is the only path to return and liberation. With the outbreak of the October 7 battle, as bloodshed escalated, I found myself facing a surging humanitarian tragedy in the south. I spontaneously transformed into a humanitarian initiator confronting the magnitude of the disaster that befell our people. Rafah city, where I live and where I witnessed waves of forced displacement from Gaza governorate and the northern part of the Strip, was overflowing and almost suffocating with people, transformed from a small city into a massive camp accommodating over a million displaced individuals. The needs of these people exceeded all capacities of institutions, bodies, and humanitarian teams. The shortage of food, water, medicine, and shelter was evident by all measures, making every moment there another kind of battle —a battle for survival and life amidst destruction and ruin.

Amidst indiscriminate shelling that spared no tent, shop, hospital, clinic, or inhabited home filled with the displaced, we went out to help people, carrying food coupons, water, a small bag of bread, or a basket of vegetables, and distributed them to displaced or needy families. We searched for these families amidst the shelling and hell. Often, we would reach a tent only to find it had been shelled by the previous night's bombardment, and the family members were either martyred, injured, or

even completely erased from the civil registry, as if they had never been there.

These voluntary initiatives quickly expanded into an organized and widespread effort through the PFLP, establishing a large number of aid distribution centers ("takiyat") and water distribution points. In moments like these, and amidst the escalating pace of shelling, death, and destruction everywhere, we felt that we were martyrs on standby every minute. The sound of drones and planes above our heads whispered, "You're next," and we, like others, felt we were the next target.

Deprivation was comprehensive, not just of food and water, but of safety, sleep, dignity, and even the ability to grieve for those we lost. We suppressed our pain to continue walking to the tents, distributing what was available, assessing impossible needs, and setting up tents for families whose members were elderly or sick. Often, we would be away from home for a day or two, and sometimes we had nothing to eat ourselves, all to help the displaced. Nevertheless, our utmost energy and desire were to volunteer to help our people or contribute to providing first aid and bandaging wounds, and to prevent further collapse in a world that was already collapsing.

I realized, as I had never done so before, that resistance is a comprehensive state, and therefore not limited to the rifle, but includes carrying water and food to the tent, and consoling a family or a mother who has lost her children. In this war, I saw that humanitarian work under fire is another form of resistance. In these difficult, harsh, painful, and complex circumstances, a precise description of Gaza's situation under this devastating war—considered the most horrific war in this modern era—was formed within us. We saw Gaza is linked by a spirit and intertwined genes of pain, resistance, and steadfastness. No aspect can be separated from the others: a state of displacement and siege, of continuous losses and farewells, and renewed hope. In the womb of these difficult circumstances, a unique Gazan personality always emerges, one that has created its own history, not just through individual heroism, but through deep societal

cohesion and the ability to adapt and innovate in the most difficult circumstances.

Gaza is truly different. In my opinion, it is a living embodiment of a life inseparable from resistance. Every detail of daily existence—from education to art, construction, and development—carries a powerful challenge to silence and surrender. It's a strong reproach to the world's silence, complicity, and abandonment that Gaza has faced. For Gazans, resistance isn't just a tactic; it's a culture, a way of life. Every breath inhaled on this land takes in the spirit of challenge and steadfastness.

We are witnessing a complete society that conducts its simple life by employing all tools of resistance and steadfastness, while simultaneously adapting to the most difficult circumstances. Despite continuous wars, bleeding, and tragedies, Gaza has remained strong and unbroken. It surprises and astonishes everyone with its ability to rise from under the rubble, to innovate, and to create hope amidst death, destruction, and ruin. It is a rich struggle, born from the tormented, fragmented, besieged, and marginalized, but it is also the experience of human beings who create life from among the rubble of wars, and rebuild fortresses of hope on the ruins of destruction.

Gaza, a multicultural and diverse human entity, can only be understood as a resistance deeply rooted in the consciousness of its generations, united in the choice of resistance, cohesive in the program of struggle, and rejecting fragmentation and defeat. This is what makes Gaza a unique model of living resistance, measured not only by its military strength, but by its ability to exist amidst the rubble, to renew itself, and to inspire the entire world with its unwavering steadfastness and brave resistance that astonishes the world with its audacity and courage.

Hani El Salmy

"This is Ghassan Kanafani"

Hani El Salmy, a novelist and short story writer, anchored his literary work in two compelling, disparate themes: the a humorous take on the cynicism of life produces, where declared human rights rarely materialize, and counterpointed to the enduring innocence and vulnerability of children. El Salmy consciously positioned himself as a literary disciple of Ghassan Kanafani, the seminal Palestinian militant intellectual whose own narrative was tragically cut short by assassination in 1972. The recent genocidal assault on Gaza, however, violently erased the distance between El Salmy the author and El Salmy the subject, turning him into a character in his own unfolding narrative. For him, words became the most vital means of survival and resistance. Rooted in his role as a teacher, El Salmy fiercely urged his students and all the children he mentored to write—seeing the pen as a weapon, believing that everyday stories are their enduring identity and the offer essential light against oblivion.

On Why "The Soldiers Don't Like Books"

IN GAZA, the sun barely crests the horizon before we confront death at every turn, in every fleeting moment. This land is no longer simply where we live; it has morphed into an open battleground, steeped in a bitterness and pain that time itself cannot erase. And because words are the most faithful companions our hearts and minds can have, writing has become our singular means of survival. It is the hidden voice behind our groans, the

constant fragrance in moments where death looms, yet we tenaciously cling to life.

I am the writer Hani El Salmy. I was born in Al-Arish, Egypt, during a time when the borders between Palestine and Egypt were porous. My grandfather Ahmed and grandmother Fatima settled here after the displacement, while the rest of my grandfather's kin built their homes in Gaza. My father, uncles, and aunts followed, and my grandfather's family grew large. The reason for this geographical split remains unanswered; it seems that the complexities of geography, politics, and the nascent wars between Egypt and the occupying state of Israel were not as pronounced then. Both the Gaza Strip and the North Sinai Governorate were under occupation.

My father worked as a teacher in the schools of Al-Arish until the 1980 "division." I was born there, and subsequently, my parents moved to Gaza after my father was dismissed from his position due to his resistance against the occupation. He chose to work as a laborer within the occupied territories, painting and plastering. My siblings and I grew up attending UNRWA schools for refugees in the camps that sprang up after the *Nakba* in 1948. We received medical care in UNRWA clinics. Even now, the faint marks of penicillin injections remain on our skin, and the bitter taste of Acamol lingers in our mouths. We eagerly awaited our father's return each evening, his clothes invariably smeared with colors and the scent of paint. He would often bring beautiful, used clothing and Israeli food—bread and those *zaki* (delicious) canned goods.

Time rushed onward, and I matured to the sounds of gunfire within the narrow alleys of the camp, amidst the black smoke billowing from burning tires, under the constant imposition of curfews, and witnessing the arrests of young men by soldiers. These details were the backdrop of the First *Intifada* that erupted in occupied Palestine in 1988. At this time, I was in the third grade of a humble school in the camp. Our classrooms often held 40 students, yet barely twenty from each cohort reached adulthood, the rest lost to the relentless wars, intifadas, soldiers' bullets, and the internal strife that plagued families within the camp.

During the lulls, when the gunfire subsided and the soldiers retreated from the streets, we would grab a ball and play in the city's solitary club. Once, a boy kicked the ball with too much force, sending it into a small-doored library. I chased after it. A well-dressed man emerged, holding the ball. I asked him what lay within. He smiled and said: "Many books! Come and befriend this place once you're done playing."

His invitation echoed in my mind like a persistent woodpecker. Play ended, and I raced to the library. Stepping inside, I inhaled a breath unlike any I had taken in before. The scent of books was the very essence of eternity. I wandered through the shelves, flipping through pages. My gaze settled on a small book. Its cover featured a man whose face seemed familiar. "Who is this man?" I asked the librarian. "This is Ghassan Kanafani," he replied.

I cannot pinpoint the exact force or moment that sparked my admiration. From then on, I was immersed in the world of books and libraries. My life transformed into a tapestry of words, sentences, characters, covers, spines, blank pages, and pens. Everything around me became a potential subject for writing, reading, and contemplation. I began to answer the unanswerable: Why is the sky blue? Why is a loaf of bread round? Why are middle school girls beautiful? Why is the camp so ugly? Why do city children become doctors while we, the camp's children, become laborers in the occupied territories? Why did electricity take so long to reach the camp? Why do the water taps always seem to snore? Why is Israeli bread zaki? Why do all those who leave the camp for the Gulf countries become wealthy?

Growing up in the camp amidst wars, writing became more than mere documentation or an escape from reality. It was a constant companion, listening to our sighs in moments of pain and lending us strength in times of weakness. In every intifada, the pen was a weapon for me, no less vital than any other. In those moments when the ground trembled beneath our feet, and the sounds of explosions mingled with screams and wails, the pen remained steady in my hand, recording everything: the unseen details and the unspoken emotions.

The camp: a heart woven from fabric, a soul forged in fire. It is not simply a place, but a living entity. Its alleys slumber to the whispers of grandmothers and awaken to the cries of children. The scorched walls breathe the aroma of coffee, and small suns of drying laundry bloom on the rooftops. Here, time is not measured in hours but by the echoes of footsteps, the tales of evenings, and the faces of those returning from aid distributions. Its houses are not mere structures, but affectionate boxes, precariously stacked from trembling cement and rusted tin. The walls are as fragile as eggshells, allowing you to hear the neighbor's heartbeat, a child's weeping, and the shy laughter of a lover. Nothing remains truly hidden in the camp; privacy is a rare indulgence, but human warmth is freely given, and neighbors' hearts open even before their doors.

The people of the camp resemble lions: their features are sharp, their gazes intense, their backs bowed by burdens, their patience as solid as rock. Yet, approach them more closely, and you will find hearts as gentle as cats, craving affection, fearing solitude, and dreaming in their sleep. Their bodies may be heavy like elephants, weighed down by daily toil, by sacks of flour, and by water carried from afar. However, when confronted by a heavily armed soldier, they transform into butterflies, light on their feet, soaring above fear, unburnt.

Customs do not fade in the camp, they are inherited like family names. The taboon oven ignites both hunger and nostalgia, and a wedding is incomplete without the piercing ululations that climb the walls. The coffee cup is not washed between guests, a testament to generosity. And a neighbor raises his neighbor's children in their absence, without being asked.

In the camp, life is like a taut rope stretched between two pains: the ache of loss and the agony of waiting. Yet, it is an unbreakable rope, for beneath it, lie hearts that know how to transmute pain into light, silence into song, and tragedy into unwavering resolve.

The camp is not a tent nor a temporary address, but an identity forged in fire, the enduring story of a homeland etched onto a body that continues to

resist.

I wrote about the children who had lost their homes, about the mothers who bore the weight of loss, about the youth whose futures were extinguished in a battle not of their making. I wrote about Gaza, my city that simultaneously weeps and laughs, about a land that knows only suffering and resilience. Writing was more than just a record of reality; it was an attempt to comprehend it, to decipher its hidden codes. It is the perpetual search for meaning in a world that has lost so much.

In the camps, where displacement had become the defining characteristic of life, writing was my sole refuge. Amidst the tents resembling hills of broken memories, I wrote of the anguish of loss, the unending pain, the moments we lived in constricted spaces, and our dreams that had morphed into ghosts. Writing was a constant companion, never abandoning me even in the harshest of times.

In every journey of displacement, words were the only possessions that could not be stolen. They were our means to endure hardship and to preserve the memories that stubbornly clung to life. Writing always whispered to us: “Write so that you remain here, so that you remain alive in this land they have so relentlessly tried to make you forget.”

From my earliest childhood, I ran in terror of death, not from the natural end, but from the violent finality of a bullet or a tank shell. From the First Intifada until this very day, someone has always been missing from the classroom, from the neighborhood, from the family.

It seems that living in the Gaza Strip offers a peculiar opportunity for creativity, as here you are compelled to be both an innovator and a resistor. During the First Intifada, I threw stones, and now, in the genocidal war of 2023, I am a displaced person, desperately seeking shelter.

Over the past thirty years, I carved out a luminous space for myself called “writing.” The friends with whom I once threw stones have become musicians, artists, and poets. As for me, I discovered my own talent for writing when I would inscribe phrases on the camp walls like: “Rise like the wind, rise like the stories, for the enemy has blocked the roads.”

Once, while playing football, I stumbled upon a library hidden beneath the bleachers of the youth club. Its owner told me, “The soldiers do not like books.” It was then that I felt an undeniable urge to write, to carry books through every street as an act of defiance against the soldiers.

While other children fashioned paper airplanes, I sought out books to emulate, writing stories that I would then read aloud to the neighbor’s children. I penned my first tales during the Intifada: “The Ogress” and “The Mad Soldier,” adorning each page with a faded rendering of the Palestinian flag.

Despite the ever-present fear of soldiers and the constant threat of permit confiscation, I continued to write. With each intifada, I chased after writing, and writing chased after me.

The anxiety of writing during wartime is a unique affliction, as nothing compares to the act of writing as the sky is torn apart by bombardments, when words do not flow from warm ink but from ashes rising from beneath the skin. Every sentence written under the deafening roar of rockets is like children navigating a minefield, unaware of where the earth will next swallow them whole. In times of war, the writer is trapped between the primal instinct for survival and the insistent whisper of the page. He reaches out to write, but his trembling fingers betray him, not because the words are unwilling, but because they know that mere truth is no longer sufficient.

Writing in wartime is not a privilege, but a battle—a battle against oblivion, against distortion, against silence. The writer does not choose to write but rather is compelled to bear witness, to be the living conscience of what unfolds. In a certain moment, writing becomes akin to piecing together the shattered fragments of memory, not to beautify the wounds, but to meticulously document them.

This is what I have done in my novels. I wrote about the boy who emerged from the rubble, searching for a reason to remain. I recounted the tale of a child who carried an entire intifada within his small frame. As for “When My Father’s Face Disappeared,” it was the raw cry of a child who lost his father to the bombing, left alone to confront the world, armed only

with words. The stark pain of suffering and disease in the face of war was a powerful presence, pervading each story.

Anxiety never leaves the writer in those moments: Is what I write enough? Do I convey the truth, or do I betray it with excessive eloquence? Do I even have the right to write while my friends are being buried beneath the debris? And yet, we write. Because writing is not a luxury, but a final act of love for this world. We write to give names to pain, faces to martyrs, and a language that can articulate fear.

I have written children's stories, including "The Secret of the Smell," "When Hind's Face Disappeared," "Masa," "The Sweet Cactus," "The Shadow Dances with Me," and "Our Neighborhood Grandmothers."

In Gaza, we exist between the poles of death and life. Death is like a yellow bulldozer devouring everything, and life is a simple man smiling in the face of oppression. From this duality, I draw my inspiration.

Among the stories I have written are "A Body and Gunpowder," which tells of a child who sleeps on a coffin and awakens to carry a martyred child to the cemetery; "The Ogress," where the protagonist sees the soldiers as the monstrous ogress; and "The Stupid Soldier," who cannot navigate the camp because he does not understand its rhythms.

In times of war, ideas do not arrive during the shelling but in the quiet aftermath, once the soldiers have stopped to rest. They appear like fruit before a starving person; we seize them and begin to write.

The events in my stories have evolved alongside the escalating conflict: from throwing stones to wielding a rifle, from weekly deaths to daily massacres. Sadness has become as ubiquitous as mosquitoes, infiltrating every home.

Characters do not enter my stories according to any fixed rules; they emerge from the shattered streets themselves. The heroes of classical literature run alongside us under the relentless bombardments.

After each round of shelling, Gaza transforms into a stage for writing: the destroyed houses become settings for horror, the bombed parks become backdrops for love, and every street corner holds a story waiting to be told.

We do not dwell on time when we write. Our entire history is one of resistance: from the Nakba of 1948 to the massacre of 1957 to the intifadas to the war of 2023. We have invented nothing; we have only written. We resist with words as others resist with weapons. We wield the feather, the pen, and the text as they wield the rifle. Our creativity is a form of survival.

We write with swift, unadorned introductions, like my novel "This Bullet I Love," which begins: "Maryam was born and died on the bed she is sitting on now."

Before this current war engulfed us, a war in which I am but one of its significant characters, I had a habit of raising my hand to the sky, tattooed with a brass bell, a silver crescent, and an iron horn. The nature of the words I sent heavenward mattered little—whether they tasted of Gazan oranges, resembled the wax of church candles, or were as delicate as crisp bread.

I would tell the sky everything I desired, especially that my unborn daughter would have black hair, colored eyes, and a voice that, when she cried, would echo the melodies of Fairuz.

And that my pockets would transform into a vast emporium of clothing, food, makeup, vegetables, fruits, meat, and ice-cold water, so that my wife would never again be angered by my daily refrain: "I don't have the price of your dreams." For I understood that dreams alone emanated from my pockets.

And because I possessed a certain skill with language, I would also petition the sky for sustenance for the little sparrow that slept on the neighbors' roof, never forgetting the dervishes of the alley, that they might find a place to rest and conceal their tattered garments. Once, I even asked the sky to send a beechwood prosthetic leg for our neighbor who sold sesame, pistachio, and semolina sweets at her doorstep, so she could chase after the children who would occasionally pilfer a piece.

O God, do not punish me for dwelling in Gaza and writing of how my grandfather polishes the keys to the ancient olive grove, I write like the intricate embroidery on my grandmother's wedding dress, and the secret of

the sage infusion that soothes stomach aches, and the bleating of my uncle's sheep that resembles a timeless melody. For I write of the long rifle hidden amongst the family's clothes in the closet, and of the pillows adorned with the yellow Dome of the Rock and the bells of the Church of the Nativity. I write until the shackles of Hanzala in Naji al-Ali's drawings are finally broken.

And I condense my words when the image of black beetles attempting to cross the street without being crushed by speeding car wheels flashes through my mind. I pray for their escape as a student evades school punishment for skipping homework to chase a rag ball with bare feet.

When the war erupted, I began to run through the streets like a massive truck carrying people and their homes during displacement, running and running like a disoriented chicken. At times, I would transform into a braying donkey, its back laden with people, or a gray bull in a Spanish arena, pierced by countless lances. My fingers grew long and gnarled like a witch's, and my feet, from the endless pursuit of bread and water, became as heavy and swollen as an elephant's.

After becoming a displaced person dwelling in a tent, I would wear a jacket with deep pockets to store the occasional biscuit offered as charity, and sturdy, wide trousers to withstand the jostling in endless queues. In my bag, I carried my identity card, a family photograph, a ration card, copies of my daughters' birth certificates, my parents' chronic medication cards, a hammer, thread, wires, plastic bags, scissors, a knife, a painkiller, and a Ventolin inhaler to ease constricted airways.

I would deliberately avoid the paths and queues for water and bread frequented by my former lovers, lest they see me in my tattered state and impose upon me the elegant language I once gifted them before the war.

And I would conceal my face and my labored breathing when encountering former students, now aspiring narrative writers, fearing they might note: "I saw the teacher without his sunglasses and without his favorite cologne." But in all honesty, no one truly notices anyone else in these times; the machinery of memory has broken down in this war.

[In the war, I learned that when men's features are lost, they laugh often, while women understand that angels are the ones who steal beautiful features in times of sorrow.]

I tried to pluck the thorns of war from my skin and went in search of the boys and girls who write in the displacement camps. And I rang the bells and greeted them as a goose greets its goslings with a dance in the water.

Because I hold a deep conviction that writing is what resists the wind, transforming feet into roots in the earth, and that writing alone can mend the holes in your jacket and add a fifth season to nature. To gather a group of them, I would join them in the salty water queue and the bread queue, telling them that the sounds of planes and bombs are the soundtrack to what they will write. The tent's ugly triangular shape and the wounds you sustained in your last brawl over the aid distribution window are the very climax of events in your universal text.

You only need to write as the ancestors inscribed on palm trunks with axes and sweat, write for the white-collar workers and tie-wearers words that will make them hang themselves above the luxurious tables, write about the sound of your hunger that resembles the drums of the native around the fire before they were erased from the memory of the earth, write until the holes in the sponge widen to swallow your tears before they fall into the dish of beans and peas, writing will make you toys of cloth and wood, and after you play with them, put them in the mud oven to bake your last meal before the soldiers of the big tank with their iron helmets and pockets full of bullets, gunpowder, chocolate, and cold sweet water smell it.

When I meet the children and urge them to write, I would enter their heads like pre-war memories in front of the ice cream shop, like the crunch of nuts in their mouths, like the elegance of the school uniform and the smell of school desks, and hot like morning falafel. I would enter their heads like an open window overlooking the Khalifa Square of their homes, overlooking the basin of mint and the speckled butterflies that circle the sugar dish.

I taught them how to smell an idea as if they were a hunter and extract it from its holes and make a barbecue out of it. I taught them how to scratch their skin from the day's fatigue so that it falls like songs sung by Reem Talhami above the mountains of Bethlehem. I taught them to wipe the dust from car lights to reveal the potholes in the streets so they would avoid falling, and to enter the mind of Michelangelo and become paintings he hangs on the walls of tall churches.

I told them: Let place and time fall when you write, for you are the place, like a street in France with lampposts that never go out and a lady walking beneath them in a princess dress wearing red high-heeled shoes, and time is you, historians wonder where to place your time in history books, because your time has the smell of mud, the splitting of the moon, and the ringing of bells above the jasmine tree. You are the time that controls the length of night and day and controls the genetic makeup of lovers and those departing on fast trains.

I told them: You are the hero, because you resemble Don Quixote and your shirt is made of cardboard paper, you are the hero even if your daily food is repeated, you are the hero even if the tent is narrow for you, you are the hero even after your father's absence from the last bombing, you are the hero as you carry buckets of water and distribute bread like Jesus Christ to your family, neighbors, and disciples, you are the hero even if your back pain increases, your eyesight weakens, and your weight decreases from lack of sleep due to the sound of planes.

I told them: You are the end, and you must choose the closed ending for your text as the garden of the rich closes its doors to the hungry, you must choose a closed ending as you close the door of your tent or close the buttons of your jacket in the wind. Let your ending be strong as the wood of boats and as beautiful as red nail polish, the color of your grandmother's hennaed fingers, soft as the laughter of a child who got a can of sweet-tasting yellow corn.

We did not stand then in a circle or a square with a missing side to write. We turned our backs to each other, as if we were strangers. Each one

writes and has octopus arms: an arm for bread, an arm for water, an arm for fear, an arm for the tent, and two arms for writing. None of us sees what the other writes, and we do not know for whom we write, and there is no clothes hanger to hang our texts on, or a clothesline. We only wrote to the sky, so that our souls would become light and agile, able to jump over the fence to steal green grape leaves. We write to become a peg for the tent, to become fluffy like cotton candy.

After you write what you love and how you love the world to see you, you can stand comfortably in the long queue, and regulate your heartbeat during the bombing, and help your shadow walk behind you without fear. After writing, you will know how to answer the eternal question: What does the word homeland mean under the roof of the tent?

Day after day, the thorns of war grew on my skin until I became a dense cactus garden, and I found no one to remove them from me except writing, as if it were silver scissors in the hand of a monk who came from the ancient churches, so he began to prune my thorns. I am the writer who still endures like a doctor who dies while treating, like the teacher who turned his heart into a board for students to write numbers and letters on, like the farmer who protects his trees from rockets and plants them between the cracks of his palms.

When I write, I am like my mother, who breastfeeds the camp with patience and resistance.

I write to become a smile on the lips of our neighbor who lost her four children and lost her memory from too much crying.

Reem Alaa Hamdaqa

Writing Against the Void

Reem Hamdaqa, a translator and storyteller from Gaza, writes about profound pain, yet imbues that pain with the unyielding dignity of her people. For her, writing is a disciplined act: a means to remember, a steadfast form of resistance, and crucially, an attempt to keep fourteen members of her immediate family alive. They were extinguished in a single blast during Israel's genocidal war. The immense grief of this mass loss—the sudden void of fourteen lives—often eclipses the agony of her own physical injuries, which require immediate, life-saving evacuation outside the Strip. Though her name is on a desperately long list of tens of thousands needing transit, she remains confined, waiting. It is in this terrible pause, this limbo of injury and indifference, that she continues to write.

"Lest the Planes See Us"

IN THE GRAND HALL, where bullet and shrapnel holes embroidered the walls like a cruel mosaic, I sat on the floral sofa. There, my parents recited their daily prayers, morning and evening. I would join them and then share my weary day with my mother. She was always there: cooking, watching the news, scolding gently, loving fiercely, offering serene smiles and whispered prayers. A mother, simply. Outside, the sky briefly wore a delicate blue, soft enough to shatter. But soon, the black clouds of bombardment bled across it, erasing its fragile peace. The drone and warplane returned, their buzz brutally shattering the strange, short silence. Lying on the sofa, I

considered the fate of all in Gaza, the future no longer a ghost. Only existence remained; survival was too distant to name.

I do not think that we are heroes anymore, and no one living under these skies believes this. We are people with feelings, who mourn, rejoice, fear, and carry the hollow ache of loss. I believe that when the world stops casting us as symbols of sacrifice and when they see us as human, not metaphors, perhaps then the burden of our myth will break.

Every child, parent, daughter, grandparent; every dust-covered survivor pulled from the rubble; every voice I have heard on flickering screens, straining against tears to sound strong, or simply those crying without shame. They all long for the rhythm of a dull, ordinary day. No one wants heroism. They long for Friday mornings. I have almost forgotten how it feels to wake in a home with a complete family; a home filled with life, chairs pulled out, laundry waiting to be folded, familiar voices trailing into each room.

No one yearns to script a new life on foreign soil or gather meaning from unfamiliar hands. We only wanted our "normal": our mothers humming in kitchens, and fathers lingering at doorways. We wanted to walk by peeling paint, unadorned walls. We wanted to learn at national schools, crowded universities; eat at small, unbranded restaurants all around the world; wear homemade clothes; walk without purpose. To be. Perhaps we never wanted to be heroes etched into global awe. We never wanted to be heroes or sources of inspiration.

A Wooden Table and Six Chairs

We had a finely crafted wooden table that my carpenter father used for his work, surrounded by six chairs. There were five of us but we always kept an extra one ready: for a grandchild, neighbor, uncle, or passing *hajja*.[1] Every meal awaited a guest. This table witnessed so much: Ramadan iftars, joyful Eid breakfasts, birthdays, baby-shower parties. The chairs were never empty.

Then, everything changed.

Time bled: months into a year, then another. Two Ramadans, and three Eids passed. Each one came heavier, lonelier, echoing with absence. The table forgot how to welcome. The chairs stood still, untouched. The hosts became guests, eternal ones, resting in graves.

Grandmothers, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters were laid side by side in mass burials. Survivors were laid in hospital beds in inhuman conditions, while the "lucky" ones crouched beneath plastic sheets and tents, whether in open streets or over the rubble of what used to be their homes.

As ordinary people, we longed only for the dawn's cool breath, for familiar greetings across doorways, for laughter untainted by guilt, and for the simple joy of passing sweets hand-to-hand.

Now, I search for the faces of my beloved ones in each face I see, and for a forgotten echo in every voice. But they are no longer here.

I remember our neighbor's tree, and how I cried an entire day when its owner pruned its branches. Thinner, quieter, it stood still, stark in its emptiness, yet standing. A branchless tree that endured.

We never sought to be a fairytale, nor to die by rocket fire, hunger, disease. We never wanted to be magazine headlines nor trending hashtags; we just needed to be human. To cry over a tree again.

The Night Israel Murdered My Family

On March 2, 2024, a black shroud came over me when Israel murdered four generations of my blood in one night. Killed and erased, not just from the civil registry but from the living memory of happy, whole kin. Entire generations, from my 80-year-old grandmother to my cherished three-year-old nephew, swallowed by the night. I barely escaped the slaughter, and now their story—burned on my eyes—is mine to carry.

That night, Israel stole the core of my life and snuffed out the light in my eyes. My dearest ones were taken away from me. An Israeli airstrike obliterated fourteen of my family: my mother, father, two sisters, grandmother, my sister's children, and my whole uncle's family, except for

two. They were taken away from me. I was left behind, stamped with the cruel title: sole survivor.

My family unknowingly slept their final night in our home before my mother, baking bread and Managish, prepared our last breakfast, again without knowing it. My sisters tidied their room one last time.

Israeli tanks besieged the neighborhood. Amid explosions and the smell of gunpowder, my father pushed back and opened the windows slightly, and closed the door behind us—his last act of care, and final farewell to our home.

We heard the voices of Israeli soldiers booming around us: "Displace to the south, or we will destroy this school on your heads." This was the impetus for our first push to flee our northern Gaza home. For 40 days we had endured the bombardment, dozens of us sheltering within the walls of an UNRWA[2] school. Our first steps on a journey chasing the ghost called "safety." We walked for over six hours beneath a burning Sun before, at last, we attempted to knock on the walls of the tank.[3] We had reached the south. It was here, in a supposed "safe zone," that my family was murdered.

People had been divided. Some said: "We have to flee to the south, save our lives before it's too late;" others, "No, we must stay; if we're many, they won't dare hurt us." Someone else: "They'll arrest our men, maybe even kill them in front of our eyes." And another person: "If we flee, we'll just become human shields. Isn't it better to stay?"

The debates never went anywhere nor reached an end. "We're not leaving. This is our home." "You think the south is any safer?" "They'll stop us at the border. Kill us there." "We'll die of thirst and hunger before we even cross." "There are no shelters, no schools, nothing left for us down there."

And finally, someone whispered the unspoken fear that lingered on all our tongues: "We will die—on the border."

We decided to leave only if the majority of those around us left. When we did, we knew the requirements: walk in a single line, don't look back

when heading south, don't stray or hesitate. Carry one backpack. Put your hands on your head. Wave a white flag.

People gathered clutching white flags, pale faces tight with fear. Snipers watched from behind the sand shields and thick glasses. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw their fingers resting on triggers. We walked, trying to stay together as a family. Everyone walked southward, step by step, into the unknown.

For six hours, we walked. Six hours under a punishing sun, in clumps of heat and dust. Six hours. I lost consciousness repeatedly, waking each time on the ground. Then, we had to stand still for nearly two hours. Snipers, reclining comfortably in chairs, sat and watched us. People crossed one by one. Names were called out and people were dragged away. We saw men bound, kneeling, hands tied behind their backs. An infant near me wailed without pause. Another, barely a year old, sobbed for water, the sound clawing at me. I too was parched. I cried to my sister that I needed water. Something sweet. A phantom sugar burned in my throat. Behind us, an injured child carried by her family died on the road. We will die here, I thought. As if reading my thoughts, someone begged: "Shoot us. End it. Fire a rocket and spare us the shame."

The sun seared our vision. The line did not move. Ahead, a sand barrier, one small mountain. Cross it, and you are in the south. We crossed, only to find more sand. More road. We were split apart. Is my mother alright? Did she collapse? My father, did he make it? My sister and her children, how were they? A woman gripped my arm. "Have you seen a boy? He's five." I looked at her. How could I see anything? How could we reunite when even the road was broken?

Killed at Midnight

For nearly a hundred days, we lived in my uncle's house in Khan Younis, in Block 89. A "green block" on the occupation map, it was therefore supposedly "safe," albeit without food or water.

The house pulsed with women and children. My grandmother, fleeing skies heavy with rockets, left the home she entered as a bride more than 60

years ago. She came south seeking shelter for her aging soul. The house held many. We shared meals, invented sweets, and stole laughter from terror. Moments of light etched into walls we thought might keep us alive.

On the night of March 2, around nine, I saw them for the last time, my parents, my sisters, and my whole family. My last look at my entire world. I was reading chapter three of *Anne of Green Gables*. I spoke to my parents. We called my sister, displaced in a tent in Rafah. I teased my younger sister. Then I slept, never knowing I was closing the final chapter of the life I once knew.

Around 10:30 PM, the bombardment began. I woke to the scream of explosions. I sat up, shakingly screaming. My father and mother stood by the door. Heba, my older sister, beside me. We were all screaming. Through the window, all I saw was a scenery filled with fire. A wall of flames. My younger sister, Ola, still lying in her bed. “Yaba! Don’t open the door!” we cried. Seconds later, the house collapsed. The ceiling crumbled; the walls blasted inward, into my face.

I was stuck under rubble. The sharp stench of gunpowder filled my lungs. Stone and ceiling pressed on my body. My skull throbbed. My bones felt broken. The moon full, darkness complete, winter’s bite still in the air. I was alone. Buried. The stories I’d read about being trapped alive meant nothing now. I don’t know how long I was unconscious. When I opened my eyes, I thought I was in a nightmare. No logic to what happened, only pain.

I screamed without reason or purpose, scraping at the stones on my chest and hands. My fingers bled. The rubble was heavy. My breaths were heavier. I waited for something, anything. I heard my uncle shouting for his children. A man called his name. I could not free my legs. Through the rubble, I saw red streaks of gunfire cut the sky, directly above my head. After nearly an hour, my brother Ahmed and my cousin found me, having come from a neighboring house. Ahmed wept as he dug me out. He screamed my family’s names, lifted the wreckage off me, hoisted me onto his back, and ran.

Tanks, Not Ambulances

As Ahmed carried me through darkness and debris, each step drove pain deeper into my bones. I had been pulled from the rubble, my body burnt, my face bloodied and dust-choked. He brought me to the house where he had been sheltering, which had also been bombed, with glass, shrapnel, and splintered wood everywhere. Women and children sat stunned in the dark. Tanks kept firing. No one could speak. The shattered glass cut anyone who moved.

Then my sister, who had been in a nearby house with her husband and their five children, appeared. When the house collapsed, she had clawed through the wreckage with her bare hands and pulled all five children out alive. Their clothes torn and blackened, they lived. Just barely.

We called for ambulances. For the Red Cross. No answer. The "green and safe" block was now "red and dangerous." They refused to come, and tanks and bulldozers came instead. We pleaded repeatedly. The only reply was: "There are too many cases like yours. Too many martyrs. Too many wounded. We cannot come." And then: "The area is dangerous. May God be with you."

Besieged

Within half an hour, Israeli tanks and bulldozers had encircled the entire neighborhood. I heard a voice whisper: "Don't scream! The tanks are surrounding the house!" as I pulled a blanket over my entire body and face, afraid the shattered glass from the shelling would leave unforgettable scars on my whole face, as in fact did the shell that struck the balcony above me moments after. The relentless Israeli artillery fire drew closer. While the women and children huddled in a back room, I was unable to move, and lay motionless on the ground, swallowed by darkness and fear.

On the other side of the room, my uncle was completely burned, contorted by searing pain.

His screams still echo in my ears.

He begged for water to soothe the fire in his flesh. But all we could give him was a few Paracetamol tablets—headache medicine. "My mother is a

martyr," he repeated. "May God have mercy on you, Ummi." Then he cried out to his daughters: "I wish I could stand, Yaba. I wish I could get up and look for you! My darlings, Shams and Sundus!"

My brother, sister, and cousin braved the shelling to look for survivors, and found three of my uncle's children—Hani (24), Muhammad (18), and Shams (16)—hurled far from the house by the blast. The shells fell even as they pulled them out. Muhammad was bleeding heavily, and Hani and Shams, severely burned with broken bones, screamed out in unbearable pain. They couldn't be moved nor receive medical attention. All three bled to death, and their dreams and aspirations died with them. All extinguished.

As shells rained down nonstop, mothers hugged their children and the men searched for voices crying out for help. I was dragged back toward the doorway of the room, where the rest of the family huddled, no longer alone beneath the shattered balcony. Minutes later, an Israeli tank fired an incendiary shell at the room next to us, causing a fire that trapped everyone inside. The wall collapsed on my sister's children, whose luck had run out. Within seconds, the room was ablaze. The windows and doors were sealed by pressure. My brother smashed a window and threw the children out as smoke and fire consumed the room. Even now, I remember the fire, shrieks, terror, and mothers crying out their children's names in panic. The children stepped over me and were thrown outside. In that moment, the horror of what I saw eclipsed the pain of my broken bones. I wondered if I would die from fire or suffocation, as both possibilities clawed at my mind.

At this moment, anything, even paralysis, seemed better than burning alive.

Another shell struck, and the door flew off its hinges and slammed into my face. Everyone was scrambling, screaming, calling for their children. I saw Ahmed carrying Maryam, my niece, who was already dead, her long blonde hair swaying with each step, a single braid flowing behind. Her face covered in blood, and her eyes, nose, and ears all bleeding. He laid her on the sofa and ran back to help the others. I saw little Anas, just three-years-

old, without blood, and at first thought he was asleep. He slept like an angel.

The Survivors

Ahmed returned to carry me to one of the nearby tents. “Where’s Maryam?” I asked. He wept silently and said: “God compensate your sister.” This is how I first learned she was dead. I closed my eyes and could not bear to look back at a house once full of warmth, laughter, and life, now a heap of rubble. At this point, I didn’t realize I had lost almost my entire family.

For the first time in my life, I hated the dawn. No longer a soft breeze, it felt cold, cruel, unbearable.

It only occurred to me later that I had already passed by my martyred parents and sisters, whose bodies had been flung far by the rocket blasts. Nor did I know that my sister Heba was under the rubble, just beside me. I could not simultaneously do all the things I wanted to do: run, scream, look for them with my own eyes. Disorientated and panicked beyond imagination, I told everyone around me: “My mother has diabetes! She can’t be injured!” I could not believe that she, or any of them, were gone, and clutched at the belief that, like me, they could be saved.

As we hid in a tent, we heard the tanks approaching again. I thought they would bulldoze us and bury us alive beneath the sand. But even this did not scare me, as death, at this moment, felt like a mercy.

At around 11:00 a.m. the next day, after a full night of tanks, shelling, drones, and bulldozers, my cousin found an animal-drawn cart, which carried me along with the martyrs to the hospital. The cart was packed, and the stench of blood was suffocating. Four figures lay motionless, wrapped in black, soaked in red. I recognized them. My heart whispered: “This is my family—my parents and sisters.” I asked my brother: “Are they all dead?” He did not answer, but did not need to, as his tearful eyes said everything.

As they laid me beside the martyrs, I saw Maryam’s long braid again. But suddenly my eyes settled on smaller legs. “Why are Maryam’s legs so

tiny?" I asked. "They're not hers," someone said, "They belong to Anas."

I asked about my wounded cousins. "Where's Shams? What about the boys?" "They bled to death," their brother replied. I didn't scream and just fell silent. But the silent scream has never left me: engraved in my bleeding heart, I hear and feel it every morning and evening, every time I cry.

I sat on the cart pulled by my brother and cousin, broken, bloodied, and caked in dust. The smell of gunpowder and metal clung to me for a month after. As we rolled through the ruins, I saw Israeli tanks ahead on the main road. Feeling a strange and even perverse sense of relief, I told myself that a bullet from a sniper would end this nightmare. But Ahmed did not stop and kept pulling, and then the tank let us pass. Perhaps they knew they had already done enough or did not want to show mercy, as this is what a bullet was compared to what they had left behind.

We walked for two long kilometers to Al-Rashid Street, then toward the sea, where we waited for an ambulance. People cried when they saw us: "You survived," they whispered.

But I had lost 14 souls dearer to me than my own heart: my mother, Sahar, Umm Ahmad (51) and my father, Alaa', Abu Ahmad (59); my sisters, Heba (29) and Ola (19); my grandmother, Shifa', Umm Muhammad (80); my niece Maryam (8) and my nephew Anas (3); and my uncle's family, Abu Al-Saeed (49), his wife (43), and five children: Farid (26), Hani (25), Muhammad (18), Sundus (21), and Shams (16). Only two of their children survived, after both being somewhere else that night.

They all had dreams and futures that Israel stole and extinguished in the blackness of one night.

A Family and a Grave

My father was a man deeply devoted to his work, a carpenter by trade and soul. I have never known anyone who valued work so fiercely, approaching each day with the same passion and diligence as if it were his first in the workplace. He began working at a very young age, working in the occupied territories before building his workshop with his own hands, a

testament to his determination and resilience. He was only three years old when his father—my grandfather—was killed by an Israeli bullet in the 1967 Naksa.

By killing my father in his prime, Israel deprived me not just of a loving parent, whose heart beat with tenderness for his daughters, but also the chance to know the warmth and affection of a father, which he never knew firsthand. Despite this, he became the best of fathers. The bullet that stole his father's life thrust him before a wood-cutting machine rather than a school desk, cutting short his dreams, halting his education, and stunting his growth in mathematics and language. Despite this, he mastered Hebrew, and it was from him that my siblings and I inherited a love for languages and studied Arabic and English passionately. Through him, all his children went to university.

And Israel also deprived me of the love of my mother Sahar, Umm Ahmad, as well. She had just turned 51 during the war. Before this, she had lived a quiet life, raising a family full of love. My older sister, Heba, an Arabic language teacher working for UNRWA, was found trapped beneath the rubble; her body shattered. My younger sister, Ola, nineteen years old, had just begun studying English and literature at university, before a shrapnel wound to her head killed her, plunging her dreams into a dark abyss.

And what did my grandmother do to deserve being bombed? All she did was pray, supplicate, recite her Adkhar, and weep for her distant children. After living through the Nakba at age four, she then endured the Naksa, and all the trials since. She only wished to see her sons and daughters gathered around her in her final days, not to die alone, far from the Gaza she had known all her life.

I never saw her without tears in her eyes, and we kept her company so she would never be alone. Sometimes she cried for the young men killed by snipers, for her home, the wardrobe she had brought as a bride, the memories flooding the sky like an old black-and-white photo album, for the

hunger of her grandchildren in Gaza. On other occasions, she cried when a heavy sadness weighed on her chest.

But she always reassured us: “We are far away—neither Arabs nor Jews can see us.” Like an innocent *hajja*, she would always insist: “Turn off the light, my dear, lest the planes see us.”

Maryam and Anas could hardly be said to have committed any sin, but simply had been born into a merciless world where a wall and a ceiling had been caused to collapse upon their small bodies. Shams and Hani were severely burned, and Farid was beheaded. One of Sundus’s legs was missing, and Muhammad suffered severe internal injuries that ravaged his vital organs. My uncle “survived” for three days with burns to his entire body, before dying alone on the ground, having received no medical care. His wife, Umm Al-Saeed, was buried beneath the rubble of her room for five months before her surviving son dug out her remains, by this time only a fragile pile of bones, with his bare hands.

And I am now injured and abandoned, without medical care, let alone the required treatment, having never received the chance to receive it abroad. I have now waited for more than a year and have still not received the surgery that will eventually enable me to regain my ability to move and walk properly.

My family did not receive the dignity of immediate burial, and it was only two weeks later, after the tanks and soldiers finally left, that we were able to retrieve their bodies from the open streets and bury them. But no farewell, no goodbye kiss, no last glance where one might whisper their innermost feelings to their beloved. No, there was no final farewell.

My grandmother would always extinguish the lights, lest the planes observe us. But now it falls upon me to keep their light burning. I will write with the lights on, their names, faces, and laughter etched into each verse. Let the world see us. Let them all see.

1 Hajja (Arabic: حجة) is an honorific title given to a Muslim woman who has completed the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). It is also used as a respectful form of address for elderly women, regardless of whether they have performed the pilgrimage.

2 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

3 This recalls Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Men in the Sun*, in which three Palestinians suffocate inside a water tanker while being smuggled from Iraq to Kuwait, their desperate journey ending in silence. Confronted with their deaths, the driver cries out in anguish: "Why didn't you knock on the walls of the tank?" The reference here suggests that the journey from northern Gaza was itself a desperate grasp at hope—its own version of knocking on the tanker's walls.

Rasheed Anbar

Animals as Witnesses and Martyrs

Rasheed Anbar, a 39-year-old Gazzawi and political science graduate, founded in 2017the Animal Friends Initiative on a profound socialist tenet: that all living things under Palestinian guardianship share the right to dignity and to be recognized as Palestinian. Though his home in Hayy al-Nasser was destroyed and his sanctuary obliterated in the genocide, Anbar refuses to be displaced, finding strength in his continued advocacy. He fiercely believes the animals massacred by the occupation must be regarded as martyrs. Anbar's work is a testament to shared sumud—steadfastness, using the care of neglected animals amidst wartime starvation as the ultimate act of resistance and a necessary lesson for the children of Gaza.

Animals in Gaza: A Story of Martyrdom and Life

BEFORE THE GENOCIDE, people in Gaza knew me well as an animal activist, advocate, and educator. A proud Gazzawi, I have spent the majority of my 39 years in Hayy al-Nasser, Gaza City. Our family home has been totally obliterated, and we remain hungry and displaced, but I take some satisfaction from our refusal to leave the same square kilometer we've called home. I am also proud that, even at the height of the war on Gaza, I've maintained the Animal Friends Initiative, in the belief that all living things under our guardianship have the right to a dignified life and the right to be called Palestinian too. This land is ours and theirs.

Set up in 2017, the Animal Friends Initiative was the first of its kind in the Middle East. It was based on the principle of building a culture of human bonding with animals among young people and adults. We have much to gain from animal friendships as sources of joy and mutual benefit, capable of alleviating all kinds of emotional or behavioral issues. I see these effects on children directly, but I truly believe these principles can benefit our wider society and should be taken seriously in education.

We must treat animals with respect in their lives, and protect them from all kinds of violence, torture, and harm. It follows that we should also consider all the animals massacred by the occupation as martyrs and say *Allah yirhamhum* (may God accept them), as we do with humans, knowing that these living beings are as sacred as we are.

I have been an animal guardian in one way or another since I was four or five years old, and I have fed and cared for many of them since. No different from many children at that early age, my interactions with animals were childish and rough—I would pull dogs' tails or poke the cat in the eye. Although family members saw that animals were becoming a passion, it was clear to all that I was rather careless. This changed with time, of course, and this great love of animals became a key part of my identity. It was one, moreover, that I felt other Palestinians in Gaza could realize was inseparable from their own.

By the time I had graduated with a degree in political science from Al-Azhar University, I was deeply involved in animal husbandry, with interests in every living species I could find in Gaza.

At a certain point, I felt my role was to save animals, particularly those who had been harmed or mistreated. The work became so important to me that when I got married, it had to be with someone who accepted that animals would remain such a prominent part of my life. And my stubbornness on this turned out to be quite positive! Our three children made instant and firm connections to the other beings that lived with us and quickly learned to care for them. This was greatly encouraging and led to the founding of the Animal Friends Initiative in 2017.

Part of this project involved building a sanctuary in Gaza City, acquiring and looking after many species, taking into consideration all manner of scientific and educational ethics. On a personal level, the project was tiring, forming a learning curve leading to my understanding the correct way for children to interact with these animals. From here, animal husbandry became a full-time job, including many workshops in schools and children's centers, with a particular focus on elementary years.

At this time, many in Gaza did not have a solid understanding of animal care in general, nor how it can be a form of therapy for children affected by war and occupation. In this context, the Animal Friends Initiative was an extremely important development for the Gaza Strip, entering directly into schools and places of need with workshops that all children could be involved in. We developed a relationship with UNRWA and created a program fit for all children from grades 1–6 to teach them the impact of their interactions with animals, and how they can also benefit from the experience of touching or being close to the animals living in Palestine. None of this understanding had been present in Gaza prior to the project. *Alhamdulillah*, the Initiative won the acceptance of many in our community.

I would train friends in handling the animals, and we, along with selected animals in carrycases, would visit groups of children gathered by their parents and communities in their homes. Expecting just a handful, there would sometimes be dozens of eager youngsters crammed into a neighbor's living room. The children always shared their favorite animal. One would yell, "I love mice!" and others would ask, "Do you have a parrot?!" They would listen attentively and look at our carrycases of reptiles and other creatures, initially with shyness, keen to get a glimpse but unsure if they wanted to get close—rarely had we seen Gaza's children sitting with such calmness and politeness! It was common to hear protests of "I don't want to touch the snake!" They would assume that all reptiles are poisonous. Any fears quickly disappeared as we explained the characteristics of the animals, their diets, and the physical features of their

skin, fur, or feathers, while modeling how humans may touch or handle them with respect and scientific correctness.

When I first began working with animals, I naturally became emotionally attached and was distraught when any animal passed away. However, over time I came to see death is merely a stage in the life cycle experienced by living beings, with training and experience helping me to see things more scientifically.

I learned the art of taxidermy, or the preservation of animal remains, and used these specimens as pedagogical tools. This became another branch in my wider passion, and I began to taxidermy all animals that passed in our care.

One result of this preservation was that these specimens could be used in schools and in other workshops we organized with local children to help them overcome phobias and understand the anatomy of different species. These examples included hedgehogs and monkeys, and the children quickly came to understand that these were physically the same as their living counterparts, but that their souls had passed. The same lessons were offered to older people in the community. We met many Palestinians in their fifties and sixties who had never handled a mouse, for example. Through the availability of preserved, stuffed specimens, the Initiative tackled social stigmas around disease and uncleanliness ascribed to certain animals and provided fruitful exchanges with all generations residing in Gaza.

In the early days of the genocide, from October 2023, the animals gathered in our home were an essential outlet for our children and those of our neighbors. This was especially true for those the same age as our youngest boy, Zein, aged three at the time and too young to really understand what was going on. Having animal friends around reminded us that our children still have the right to smile. Zein was still learning how to behave around birds, dogs, and other animals, and they interacted even amidst the darkness of one among hundreds of thousands of homes suffering from the power blockade imposed by the occupation.

Though we become accustomed to blackouts as Palestinians who have lived through successive wars on Gaza, children can, quite predictably, become anxious. The same is true of the animals. For our animal friends, it's crucial in times like these that they remain in our guardianship. Amidst the terror that the occupation has brought upon us, we must handle them correctly and respond to their needs. The genocidal Zionist regime has actually made this impossible—if we as Palestinian humans are subject to starvation and murderous bombings, it must be remembered that Palestinian animals often suffer a more extreme fate.

While our home remained standing, bombings were constant and extremely close, but at night, we played games involving both children and pets. The children would play a hide-and-seek style game, where they hid under the tables and, whenever they heard an occupation warplane, shouted, "We are not afraid of you! We are not going anywhere!" while dogs barked and parakeets squawked. Other times, we sang songs, including "Sawfa nabqa huna" [We will remain here], as sung by medical workers on the steps of al-Awda hospital nearby. Our daughter Olfat has a beautiful voice and has continued to sing throughout the genocide. The parrots and parakeets made every effort to join in the singing.

Just a month after October 7, the Anbar family was displaced like many others in Gaza, with the Israeli bombing of our home in Nasser Street in November 2023. We had been shot at with tank cannons in the weeks prior, leaving a gaping hole in the wall and ground. Having spent a week or so with my wife's family in the same neighborhood, we came back to try and recover what we could and take shelter in the remainder of the house. In the previous tank attacks, the animal sanctuary was destroyed, and while a small number of birds and other animals were able to be saved, the majority were massacred, including tens of parrots and many other bird species, reptiles, amphibians, rodents, cats, and dogs.

It is important to remember that many of these had been with us for the most part of a decade and had themselves learned to be comfortable around the children, without fear that they would be harmed in any way. The work that went into building this relationship was immense, taking years of

painstaking work and patience. This mutual bond was smashed in this brutal massacre and destruction. The martyrs on this occasion were not human beings, but they had souls, voices, and lives.

When their planes struck and destroyed the entire, six-story, 20-apartment block, Ansam and I were, by chance, out in the streets with the children. Again, we found refuge with family and friends and remained in Al-Shati' refugee camp, close to our demolished home. Even as some others headed south on the murderous roads signposted by the Zionist invaders, our pledge was the same: "We will remain here." Part of this commitment was out of solidarity with the small number of animal friends which had remained with us and which multiplied in the days to come. Even if we moved south, we wouldn't be able to take them all with us. We gathered other abandoned animals in our place of displacement in Al-Shati'.

Of course, we dream that we will be able to rebuild the collection of diverse species that were killed in the genocide, and not just those that are in our care as a family. Immediately, as we attempted to regather ourselves and find shelter, we decided to get organized, to gather the animals that were victims of the war on Gaza. Even on the basic level of our own children, I felt it was important that we were able to keep them around cats, dogs, and birds, to give them some outlet for play and happiness. The children of our neighbors came too, and we worked together with them and the animals.

Despite everything, there are still some beautiful animal-related stories during this war. Maimuna the monkey came to us after one of Gaza's few animal parks was forced to close and open its doors—the blockade meant that they simply couldn't feed the animals and let them roam the streets in order to find food. A primate of the wild Chlorocebus variety, she was wounded in her stomach and badly malnourished. We dressed her wound and took care of her until I found a specialist who could take her in and look after her. In the intervening period, children and their families walked relatively long distances just to get a glimpse of Maimuna, who had apparently become a local celebrity. It's telling that, despite the inhuman

conditions in which people have been forced to live, they still share the same human urge for joy—a well-known Palestinian trait.

Around a year into the genocide, we found a *kelb baladi*, a proudly Palestinian, Canaanite wild dog found in Palestine. We named him Loz, or Almond, after the brownish color of his fur. Finding him was comparable to the rarity of finding an almond in these times of enforced starvation. Like many times over the past year, I found myself walking at night near the shore at Al-Shati', wishing to God that I would stumble across a bag of flour or a can of food for the children. Suddenly, he appeared, walking between my legs, this tall, proud *kelb baladi*, attaching himself to me and responding when I played with him. Passersby commented, "Mashallah, your dog is beautiful!"

I took Loz back to the house, where the children were sleeping, wondering what his and their reaction would be to each other. When they awoke, they were elated and formed an immediate bond, playing together and responding to each other's presence. It reminded me of how beautiful life can be when we build these human-animal relationships, and how big a part of our lives their presence has become. I walk with him often with no leash, and all of the neighbors and families of the neighborhood have gotten to know him well. Loz, the war dog, saved from starvation and now a friend to all in Al-Shati' camp.

In our recent experience, the response of people in the neighborhood has been overwhelmingly positive. Folks see how we care for the animals and say things like, "There's a place in heaven for you and them." Others voice opposition and ask why we're feeding the animals rather than feeding them. Or why do I try to save lost animals rather than lost people—of course, both are trapped under the rubble of bombed-out apartment blocks and other buildings. Of course, we should be striving equally hard to save both. Moreover, the survival of our animals gives us back our own souls, which are intertwined with theirs.

Finding food for us and our families is extremely hard under conditions of total blockade, so you can imagine that finding animal feed is similarly

difficult; prices are extraordinarily high, and we have to think creatively to meet the specific needs of each animal. There is negativity manufactured in a time when our people are dying of hunger. But among the people in our immediate surroundings are many who see all the work we have done and the benefits of animal interaction with humans.

I have managed to save a small number of the many animals abandoned in the streets during the war by displaced or martyred Palestinians. With the children, we've built a makeshift sanctuary on the roof of our building. The animals we've rescued have had a profound effect on those of us huddled together in Al-Shati'. I see how the work of looking after the animals has a strengthening effect on the children's psyche, allowing them to learn the meaning of true responsibility. They remind me of myself and the passion for animals that I developed at their age. This is the kind of cultural learning that the Animal Friends Initiative still seeks to build. A future for us all. Together we tread the path of true steadfastness in action among all living things in the Gaza Strip.

Munia Jamal

The Architect of Absence

Munia Jamal is the archetype of the fierce Gazan intellectual, a woman relentlessly dedicated to acquiring all the education she could muster. Supported by her family, she obtained a degree in Pharmacy and, just as the latest war began, was pursuing a master's in Sustainable Development —a discipline tragically ironic given Gaza's systematic undoing. Her deepest passion, however, lies in writing; a craft she uses not for mere political rhetoric, but to voice the deeper meanings of her people's existence. This mission became urgently accentuated during the genocide.

When the war of extermination began, her life, like that of two million others, was violently ruptured. Chased by relentless bombing, her family resolved that she must leave the Strip for safety. She did, but she has regretted that decision ever since. It was a cruel paradox: death alongside her family, she discovered, was far less taxing than the life of absence and guilt imposed upon her away from them.

Guilt Like None Other

FOR MANY YEARS, I have wondered: can a person be held to account for their very existence? For their escape from war, from starvation, from the bombing? Each time I ask myself who I am and where I came from, this guilt returns to inhabit my mind, as if an eternal question without an answer. Is it truly a sin to be Palestinian? To be from Gaza, at a time when being alive is a charge in itself? Are we held responsible for something we

didn’t do? Or is the Palestinian guilt not an action, but an identity passed down through generations?

I grew up in Gaza as a displaced refugee but can trace my roots back to the city of Majdal -- Asqalan -- on the Palestinian coast, famous for its weaving, agriculture, and the sea’s bounty. Majdal, a city imprinted on my memory though I have never seen it, wasn’t just a place; it was an image preserved in my grandfather’s words, in the ache of longing filling my grandmother’s eyes, in small paintings hung on the walls of Gaza’s refugee camps, and in a song whispered softly: “I am returning to my homeland.”

My grandfather, “Abu Jalal,” married my grandmother, “Umm Jalal,” in Majdal, but they were forced into exile at gunpoint in November 1948, as massacres swept through villages and cities, and fear spread like wildfire. My grandmother would recount the story as if it happened just yesterday, not forgetting a single detail, saying, in a voice that never faltered: “The soldiers came, screaming and shooting, and the people cried out: Majdal is not safe, get out. I gathered my children, and we started to run. As I was leaving, I closed the door to our house and took the key with me. I said: ‘We’ll be back in two days. . . .’”

Every Thursday, my grandmother would gather us around her, spinning a tale from the threads of a life that was stolen from her: the scent of Majdal’s oranges, the bread she used to bake with her own hands in the clay oven, the embroidered dress her grandmother wove for her with red threads, which she carried with her as if it were a piece of the land itself. She would describe how she used to run with her friends in the alleyways, getting angry if she lost at hopscotch, and laughing when she won. Then she would suddenly fall silent and whisper: “All of that . . . vanished in a single day, my dear.”

My grandfather worked as a weaver, his hands moving with the grace of patience on the loom, as if weaving the stories of his people into the very fabric. He was the sole provider for his blind father, a man who had memorized the Quran by heart. My grandfather was always with him,

holding his hand and guiding him as if he were his eyes on the roads and his heart in life.

When they were displaced to Gaza during the Nakba, the family first settled in a small mud house in the Al-Shuja'iyya neighborhood. There, my grandfather started from nothing, with only his resolve and dignity. He worked as a fisherman, then cleaning and salting fish to make fiseekh—a salted fish dish—before fate led him to a completely new profession: gold trading, which later became the family business. He entered this world with the same passion and precision of hands that once wove cloth and now weighed dreams.

As the house grew, so did the family. My grandfather had five daughters and five sons; my father was one of them. They later moved to the Al-Zaytoun neighborhood, specifically to "Church Alley," where Muslims and Christians lived side by side, their houses' walls as close as their hearts. It was there that we, the children of the narrow, life-filled alleys, were born. My grandfather then moved to the Al-Rimal neighborhood, and each neighborhood was a new chapter in our story, but Majdal remained the first page, one that was never folded.

As for my father, he remained loyal to his roots, which he never saw with his own eyes but believed in as a person believes in himself. When he opened a gold shop in the currency market on Omar Al-Mukhtar Street, he insisted on naming it "Asqalan Jewelry," after "Majdal Asqalan" from which his father was exiled. He taught me from childhood that the Nakba isn't a memory in history books, but a long shadow that never leaves us, a wound that renews itself in a new form every day. He would always repeat: "Our homeland isn't a dream . . . our homeland is a right, and a right doesn't die."

I grew up with this legacy, feeling a longing and guilt I did not create, but which lives in my blood, just like memory.

Yes, we carried not only the key to an old house but an unshakeable feeling that we are culpable . . . simply for our presence, simply for being Palestinian.

And one day, more than seven decades after our first Nakba, we found ourselves living a renewed one, but this time it was harsher, fiercer, and more unsparing than any before it. As if it were a Nakba that reshaped history, not just repeated it. Nothing about it was symbolic or postponed; everything was immediate, bloody, unfolding here and now.

In 2023, I was 25 years old, working as a pharmacist and pursuing my master's degree in sustainable development at Al-Quds University, in Abu Dis. While life in Gaza was not easy, it was a homeland to us in its fullest sense. I lived my daily life with love: I studied, I worked, I spent time with my family, and I had simple dreams the size of life itself: to finish my studies, serve my community, and stay where I belonged, where the walls knew me and the faces mirrored my own.

On October 6, 2023, I joined my father, my mother, and my siblings Maram, Karam, and Hala, for a stroll by the sea. We drove through the city's streets as if trying to etch its features into our memory before they vanished. We laughed, we took pictures, and we didn't know those moments were a farewell.

In the evening, we celebrated my older sister Maram's twenty-ninth birthday. Maram, the gifted engineer and gentle soul who had always been my inspiration. We prepared a simple cake, sang for her, and shared our hopes, unaware that tomorrow would seize everything from us.

The next morning, October 7, we all woke to deafening sounds. It was six o'clock in the morning. My mother was getting my siblings ready for school, and my father was having his breakfast after the dawn prayer. We turned on the TV, and all the channels were broadcasting one headline: "The Morning of October 7." From that moment, we were plunged into a state of chaos. We didn't understand what was happening; there was no map of events nor clarity in the picture, just the sounds of rockets, smoke rising in the air, and the sensation of hearts beating in our chests.

On the war's first night, the ground quaked beneath us, and the sky exploded above our heads. I saw the fire in the heavens, and the flames drew closer to us little by little. Although I had endured four previous wars

in my life, I can assure you that this time was different—more monstrous, more profound, and more terrifying in its scale.

Every night, we gathered in the back room of our house, thinking it was safer. We sat huddled together with a single thought: if something happened, we would all die together. Perhaps it was a mercy that no one would be left behind to mourn the others.

As days passed, explosions intensified, and fiery belts of bombs spread near us, turning houses to ashes. Our house, which had seen years of laughter and life, shook with every bombing, and we realized we could be erased at any moment. The sounds of evacuation orders to the south, broadcast through army loudspeakers, echoed everywhere.

In the face of all this, we held our ground and refused to leave, until the day the land right next to ours was bombed, and the blast breached our home's walls. It was then that we had no choice but to flee under a barrage of shells. We quickly gathered what we could—important documents, mobile phones, and some sleeping mats—and left everything that connected us to the place behind: photos, furniture, memories, and longing. I couldn't even bring myself to cast a final glance at the house that had sheltered us. I still regret that moment, because it was the last time I would see it.

We fled raising a white flag from the car window, with tears streaming down endlessly, something I will never forget. The road to the south was like a scene from World War II; everything was annihilated, and the buildings that once stood tall were now rubble. The streets were silent, except for the footsteps of those fleeing and the echo of the bombing. There was no sound of life, only the sound of escape.

We lived in a tent in the Nuseirat camp to the south, which offered no protection from the cold or heat. We slept on thin mattresses that barely separated us from the cold ground. Every night, my body would hit the roughness of the soil, and the winter chill would seep into my bones. We would wake with stiff bodies, feeling aches in our backs as a daily reminder that we were homeless, without a house, without a bed, without warmth.

Even sleep, which should have been a solace, became another torment to add to our list of pains.

It wasn't just the bombing that threatened our lives; hunger was another enemy, a silent one that no one could hear, but one that slowly gnawed at the body. In the first days of our displacement, we tried to convince ourselves that the siege wouldn't tighten too much, and that the crossings would open, even if temporarily, as they had in previous wars. But this time was different. The crossings to the north and south were shut until further notice. The farms were bulldozed or burned; the orchards and fields became barren, lifeless land. Even the sea, Gaza's last resort, became a death trap; warships chased fishermen with bullets, as if cutting the last lifeline keeping Gaza alive.

As days passed, the siege began to affect our daily lives, as the stores emptied of essential goods. What was left was sold for many times its original price, making it a distant dream to obtain. A kilo of sugar that used to be bought for a modest price became worth a whole family's weekly food in peacetime. Oil, rice, flour, and even salt . . . all turned into treasures on the black market, accessible only to those with money, and money itself became worthless in the face of scarcity. And so, every day became a new battle for existence.

In the south, where we sought refuge, a few aid trucks would sometimes enter through the United Nations. But most of it was stolen or hoarded before it reached those who needed it. My father would prevent my siblings from approaching the trucks for fear of being shot or trampled. As for the UNRWA distribution points in the schools, they were a journey of torment in themselves. You had to wait for days for your turn, then stand in a long line that exhausted the body and nerves, only to return with a meager amount that barely kept you alive. So, we settled for what we could buy from the southern markets, where everything was unbelievably expensive.

We always tried to put off the moment of hunger for as long as possible. My father would roam the markets like a seeker of a mirage, searching for a rare bag of flour. When he finally succeeded and carried it to us as if it were

a treasure, my mother would receive it with eyes filled with anxiety rather than joy. She would take the bag in her hands and begin to mix the quantity she was going to knead with "bran" or wheat husks, hoping to double the amount and make it last as long as possible.

We sat around her, helping her knead with trembling hands, as if every stroke on the dough was a struggle with the fear of tomorrow. We didn't know if tomorrow would bring a new handful of flour or not. How much flour would we have left? How many days could we endure? These questions haunted us more than the sound of the planes.

And when the bread was finally ready, my mother would divide it with an uncompromising fairness—two loaves for each person a day, and sometimes only one. She would place it before us as if she were distributing life itself. We would break open the loaf and fill it with "Gazan *duqqa*"—a mixture of wheat, sesame, salt, and sumac—and if there was a little olive oil. We would chew slowly, as if trying to prolong the moment of encountering something that resembled food, something that would keep our souls attached to life, even by a thin thread.

Nothing saddened me as much as the suffering of us women, who were losing our dignity day by day in this war. I can almost swear that no woman in the world makes the sacrifices that the Gazan woman does. There were fourteen of us living in one tent. The space became so cramped that our breaths intersected, and privacy disappeared completely. The women among us had nothing but a shalih or khimar—headscarf—that they clung to all night, even in sleep, because any movement to reveal one's head or change clothes became impossible. In front of whom? And in what place? The tent had no walls, and eyes were always nearby.

Menstruation was another facet of cruelty. How can a woman manage her pain in a place with insufficient water and no privacy? There was only one shared bathroom for fourteen people. We would line up in front of it, each one waiting her turn as if we were waiting for a handout. Sometimes we would hold our needs for long hours, until we suffered from constipation and colon pain from the intense pressure on our bodies.

There was not enough water to wash, and toilet paper was a rare commodity. My mother would divide a roll of toilet paper among us as if she were dividing gold. Can you believe it? I would see the shame in our eyes as we all stood waiting for the moment to enter that cramped space, which had lost even the meaning of comfort. The bathroom was no longer a place for cleanliness, but a place for the body to be further humiliated.

I always dreamed of water running down my body from the shower as in normal days, not from small basins that barely removed any of our sweat and dust. But the water was only enough for one shower a month for each of us. Imagine that bathing becomes a distant dream, a postponed wish as if it were a luxury we didn't have the right to dream of?

One of my brothers' wives was in the last months of her pregnancy. I would see her suppress her groans with heavy silence, managing her burdened belly with an endless fear. She didn't fear childbirth itself as much as she feared the moment when she would find no hospital, no doctor, and not even a clean room to deliver her child. Her daily question would pierce us all: "Where will I give birth?" A question that breaks the heart because it has no answer.

With the disappearance of gas, fire became our only means of cooking. I would go out in the morning with my siblings to collect scraps of wood or cardboard to light. My mother's hands were blackened from lighting the wood so often, and the black smoke would fill her eyes until they teared up, but she would say: "It's okay, the important thing is we find something to eat." I knew her tears were not just from the fire's smoke, but from a heart that cried more than her eyes allowed.

Because we fled with only the clothes on our backs, we didn't carry enough clothes. We thought the matter wouldn't last long, perhaps a month or two at most, but we found ourselves living through one winter after another. And we found nothing to cover ourselves with but "balah clothes"—used clothes—which we resorted to in our desperation. Washing clothes was another story of exhaustion and suffering. We would fill small basins with what little water was left and rub the clothes with our tired

hands until they were filled with cracks and wounds. Then we would hang the clothes on a rope we made with our own hands, tied to the corners of the tent.

Perhaps these details seem small in the face of the horrors of war, but in reality, they mean everything. I write them because I believe that wars are not numbers or statistics broadcast on the news, but real faces and bodies that are humiliated every day. I write them because a woman's dignity is not a luxury that can be dispensed with, but a complete life that collapses when it is taken away. And even if we escape death and remain alive, one question will continue to haunt us: What dignity do we have left after living through all this?

But the war was bigger than all of us. It did not leave us the luxury of thinking but forced us into painful decisions that none of us could have imagined. And in a pivotal moment, my father made the hardest decision of his life: that my mother, my two sisters, my younger brother, and I would leave Gaza. The decision wasn't easy for him; our hearts are tied to his, and he is the father who knew nothing as well as he knew how to give everything he had for us. He saw our tears every night, heard our muffled weeping, and watched us fall apart from the inside day by day. He couldn't bear to see us perish before his eyes.

He wanted to protect us from a death that drew closer every day, from a stray shell or a missile that couldn't differentiate between a child and a woman, between a tent and a bakery. He knew that our suffering was no longer something that could be endured. Therefore, he didn't think of himself, but of us. He believed that our only salvation, even if temporary, was to leave. It was a decision that resembled a final sacrifice, as if my father placed his heart in his palm, handed it over to the war, and then pushed us away so that we might survive.

As for him, along with my two older brothers, Rami and Walid, they chose to stay. Their decision wasn't a fleeting one, but the fruit of a long-held conviction to protect what was left of our livelihood in Gaza, and the walls of a house that no longer had windows but still resembled us. Rami

and Walid saw returning from the south to our house in northern Gaza as a dream that could not be given up, even when returning seemed impossible at the time. They clung to a hope that resembled madness in the face of this reality, but what Palestinian doesn't need madness to endure? They believed that whoever abandons their house is afraid to never find the way back, so they chose to stay, even if it was on top of the rubble.

I lived six months under war, clinging to what was left of my life, and leaving Gaza was never part of my plans. This is my city, my house, my family, my friends, and every memory that shaped my features. Gaza, for me, was not an "open-air prison" as many call it, but the memories of my life filled with joy, love, and shared dreams.

But the war grew more savage day by day, devouring my world piece by piece, and uprooting the things we thought were permanent. In an instant, staying became like gambling with life. My father said to us, trying to hide his tears: "It's only a few months, my child, and you'll be back." But time stretched, and here we are on the verge of two years abroad, the road is cut off, and returning is a postponed possibility to no end.

The morning I left Gaza was not an ordinary morning; it was mixed with the sounds of explosions and the silence of an exhausted city carrying its scars in every corner. As I prepared to leave, my chest tightened with a weight I had never experienced before, a weight that pressed on my heart until it almost stopped. On the sides of Salah al-Din Street, extending to the Rafah crossing, the houses were completely destroyed, turned into silent rubble. The entire way, we read the Quran, trying to block out the fear with the sound of the recitation, while planes hovered above us and the bombing drew closer. I didn't expect to reach the crossing alive.

I left my father and brothers in a displacement tent, while I am in a warm bed outside the homeland. I open my phone every morning trembling at the thought that I might not find them on the other side of the screen. And even when I hear their voices, I don't feel at ease; instead, the guilt inside me grows because they are there, and I am not with them.

Perhaps this war has taken everything from us—our houses, our possessions, our memories, and our city—but it has stolen the most precious thing we own . . . the proximity of those we love.

On April 15, 2024, when I crossed into Egypt, the scene seemed as if I had emerged from a world drowning in darkness into a painting with colors so vibrant they hurt. The streetlights were steady, bright, not cutting out every few minutes as they did in Gaza, and this simplicity was a luxury I hadn't known for many months. The internet flowed without interruption, connecting me to a world that seemed to have moved on and forgotten that Gaza was still bleeding. Water flowed from the tap without measure, food was plentiful, and every bite reminded me of the hunger that gnaws at my father and brothers every day.

Communication with my family in the south was difficult. They had to walk long distances to find an internet signal through a virtual SIM card, just to write: "We are fine." But I know that these words are half-truths, and the rest is carried in their hearts, which are heavy with bombing, fear, and constant sleeplessness.

As the months passed, a fragile truce was announced, and people began to return to northern Gaza, returning to houses that were no longer houses, but demolished structures, cracked walls, and floors covered with dust and rubble. My family was among them; they returned to a house that was semi-destroyed, but they held on to what was left of a place that was once a home that gathered them.

But hunger did not leave with the truce; it became even more savage. It was no longer just a scarcity of food but turned into a weapon of war in itself. Aid began to be airdropped by parachutes. People would raise their heads to the sky like a drowning person raising their hands for a lifeline. From a distance, the scene might seem humanitarian, but on the ground, it was a spectacle of humiliation. The parachutes would fall randomly into the sea where the goods would dissolve, onto the roofs of demolished houses, or in the middle of the streets where people would trample each other in a frenzy. Many were wounded, some died trampled underfoot, and others had

boxes fall on them directly from the sky. A few days ago, a video spread of dozens gathered around a parachute that landed on the roof of a semi-demolished house, and the roof collapsed with them, and they all fell. It was a humiliating spectacle, as if we were being thrown scraps like animals in a cage and then watched from above the planes.

Then came what was called "American aid centers," opened by the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) on May 26, 2025: four central locations, protected by American contractors and under the direct supervision of the Israeli army. The people were promised that aid would reach the weakest and most in need regularly. But what happened was the exact opposite. These centers were death traps. Just two days later, the square in front of the Rafah center turned into a massacre. Tear gas bombs, live ammunition, and tanks greeted the hungry instead of flour. Thousands were killed, and thousands more injured at these centers.

Mothers, children, elders . . . all faced a choice between hunger or bullets. Soldiers watched from high towers, and snipers chose their targets. These were not aid centers, but blood traps, whose goal was to produce media images to tell the world: "Gaza is receiving aid" while the truth is that the aid itself was besieged like us, not reaching anyone except at the cost of blood.

I still carry the story of Ahmed Zeidan, a nine-year-old child, in my heart. He went out with his mother to get a little flour and some canned food, but she was killed by a bullet. People found her lying on the ground, drenched in her blood. Ahmed appeared on camera crying and saying, "My mom came back in her shroud instead of a bag of flour." That one sentence alone summarized the entire war.

Then, there is the girl who cries for her fiancé Abdullah. He was about to get married, going daily to the aid center in Khan Younis to bring what would sustain his family. On that day, a shell fell in the middle of the crowd. Abdullah died instantly. His fiancée was sewing her white dress . . . but instead of a wedding, she received his clothes stained with blood and dirt.

A few days ago, I called my father, and after a choppy conversation due to a weak signal, he said in a whisper as if revealing a secret: “Yesterday I dreamed while I was sleeping that I was eating an apple . . .” Then he fell silent for a moment and continued with a sad smile: “The last time I ate an apple was a year and a half ago.” I imagined my father, the strong man who had never asked for anything, dreaming of an apple like a child wishing for a toy. And I didn’t know what to say. His silence stayed with me even after the call ended.

My body here does not know hunger, but my soul is starving for everything we have lost. This war has made food not just a necessity, but a test of our humanity. And it has made what is called “aid” another weapon, wrapped in bags of flour. In Gaza, hunger is no longer a lack of bread; it has become another face of death, a slow death that kills people’s dignity before it kills their bodies. Yet, my family, and every family in Gaza, continues to resist. They resist every day not just to live, but to affirm that Gaza, even while hungry and under siege, will not be broken.

As for me, I walk the streets of Egypt where the sun rises and sets without a missile alert, where people exchange light conversations, laugh at small stories, and plan for a secure tomorrow. I am among them, but my soul is still hanging in Gaza, hanging with a house that is half rubble, and with hands I didn’t say goodbye to properly.

Guilt pursues me like a shadow that never fades. How can I bear the light of electricity when I know they are still in the dark? How can I reach for a full plate when I know that every bite in Gaza is snatched from the jaws of hunger? Even water, this thing that flows thoughtlessly here, was a dream we chased with a small container in Gaza.

But the guilt wasn’t just about what I have here and what they lack there, but about the separation itself. I thought that distance was just a few meters that messages and photos crossed, but separation taught me that some distances are not measured in kilometers, but by the weight of absence.

And when my cousin's son, Amjad, eighteen years old, was martyred, the wound was deeper than I could bear. I used to see him in every conversation with his mother; in the dreams he would tell me on the phone about his future after high school, about the university he wanted, about the life he was mapping out. Then suddenly, all of that was extinguished by a single shot from a drone. The incident left me unable even to comfort my mother as she cried for her brother, and her brother as he said goodbye to his eldest son and his first dream. I was here, abroad, scorched by the bitterness of helplessness, seeing the funeral in photos and videos, and feeling that I had lost a part of my heart in his coffin.

I continued to move forward, like thousands of scattered Gazans abroad, resisting surrender as we were accustomed to in Gaza, even when we are far from it. After my master's studies were disrupted by the war, I applied for a scholarship to continue my higher education at HEC Paris, one of Europe's top business schools, a dream I built and saw getting closer step by step. But the travel visa was not issued in time; my passport was held for months until the academic year ended, and with it, this dream that I had worked tirelessly for was lost. Yet, I did not allow despair to seep into my heart. Gaza taught me that getting up after every fall is a duty, and that surrendering is not an option, no matter how great the losses.

All these losses, all this separation, all this torment wraps around me like a chain of questions that do not rest: Is escape a betrayal? Is distancing myself from death, while my loved ones face it every day, a crime? Or is guilt what the homeland bequeaths to us when it is unable to embrace us all?

Gaza is not just a spot on the map, but a piece of my blood, my name, my features. I left it behind as one who leaves their heart in a place they cannot return to, and I left on a journey into the unknown, searching for a life, but carrying with me a death I haven't seen, a separation I didn't choose, and a guilt that never leaves me, even as I breathe under a safe roof.

I write this text not to justify, but to bear witness to Gaza that still rises, and to a guilt that is like no other.

Amna Shabana

The Cartographer of Stolen Space

Amna Shabana, a Palestinian writer and visual artist, is pursuing her MA in London, yet her essay is a visually and linguistically layered testimony against the genocide's targeted destruction of intellectual life in Gaza. Raised by an educator mother who defined home by love and pedagogy, Amna's lifelong quest was for a private, serene space—a sanctuary necessary for creative pursuit.

The brutal irony of the war lies in the obliteration of her custom-designed fifth home, the long-awaited fulfillment of that dream, just as she began her master's work. Displaced multiple times and grieving the assassination of her professor, Dr. Refaat Alareer, Amna transforms her personal trauma into a universal metaphor. Her narrative traces the journey of her battered pink desk and her fragmented education, finding meaning in her grandfather's maxim: "We have walked the path meant for us."

The Path Meant for Us

I WAS BORN into a family blessed with daughters, the fifth of eight. In the ordinary course of my life, I moved with my parents and siblings through five different homes. However, after initial displacement in October 2023, I have moved with them to three shelters in the southern part of the Strip. Eventually, we found a final dwelling, where we currently seek refuge in the northern part of the Strip, having returned in January 2025.

In all the homes we inhabited during our normal lives, my sisters and I shared a single room. From the tender age of five, I instinctively knew that the path I had chosen was the path of knowledge. Ever since, I have been searching for my own quiet, private space where I could store my notebooks, pens, and drawings.

I recognized my personality as dreamy and serene, consistently favoring individual intellectual pursuits, such as drawing and writing, over physical activities like strolling or active games. With each move to a more spacious home, my dream of having a private room of my own grew alongside me—a place where I could calmly and peacefully nourish my mind, far from any clamor or distraction.

In December 2022, we relocated to our fifth home. My long-held dream became a tangible reality. It was the largest house we had ever lived in, boasting a room even more beautiful than those I had conjured in my dreams. I meticulously designed the desk, bed, and shelves to accommodate all my academic books, then entrusted the designs to a professional carpenter. I also carefully selected the color scheme. As for the wardrobe, its transparent glass shelves proudly displayed all my paintings and art supplies.

The sheer spaciousness of my room and the entire house granted me the freedom to embody all the roles I had yearned for since childhood. Within my room, nestled in the heart of the upper floor, I diligently studied for my final exams for the second year of my Master's in Translation, practiced simultaneous interpretation, and successfully completed numerous writing projects.

Our small garden served as my evening sanctuary, where I would pen news from Gaza and the West Bank. On the ground floor, in the study room my father designed himself, I would sit in his chair, which remarkably resembled a university president's, and compose my academic research. This expansive spatial freedom allowed me to manifest my best self: a person devoted to knowledge and eager to share it.

Two Families, One Apartment

October 2023. The genocide. Many months of homelessness and displacement. Then, a return to nowhere. To the ruins of a house. When we returned to our home in the north, it was largely destroyed. My brother's family and ours took refuge in a small apartment that sheltered us all: each family had a single room. In the living room, we shared our fear under the persistent shadow of continuous shelling, month after relentless month.

I sat under the window of our new room, leaning on my small, battered desk, feeling the prick of its scratches on my elbows. "How could my spacious room be reduced to a mere fragment of itself?" I wondered.

My faded pink desk stood in the corner of the family's room. The smell of ash on my books, stowed inside the desk drawers, permeated my nose, starkly reminding me that the occupation had violated the intimacy of my tiny, warm room, leaving it without a wall, stripping it even of its wooden door, and thereby extinguishing the quiet serenity of knowledge it once offered.

On this very desk, pulled out of my room's rubble, a certificate of appreciation for taking part in a symposium day on May 2, 2023, shone brightly in my eyes. I recalled the committee introducing me as I ascended the platform and stood tall beside the Palestinian flag: "Amna Shabana: a Master's student from the Translation Department, who previously worked as a teaching assistant at the Islamic University, and now serves as a freelance trainer specializing in translation and writing."

I remember that, on this day, I reaped the rewards of countless late nights spent in my spacious, warm room, where I had the luxury of practicing alone. Later, I sat opposite the Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah building at the Islamic University, at three in the afternoon, and embraced my colleagues, overflowing with joy at this achievement. Even as serenity enveloped me then, a question nonetheless found its way into my mind, as I found myself pondering the committee's introduction of me and, more specifically, if this was actually the ultimate fulfillment of a childhood wish, held from when I was five-years-of-age.

But in this small, confining corner, an old, gnawing question persists! Can I truly revert to my former existence in a room shared by the entire family? By forcibly taking my room and my fifth home, the genocide violated my sanctuary of knowledge, and indeed brutally cut short my long-awaited dream.

I feel as though I am again five-years-of-age, awaiting the next move to a larger home.

The Last Happy Move

Throughout our moves from the first home to the fifth, I can vividly recall my emotions. The days of transition, leading up to settling into a new home, were always tempestuous. I would leave behind a school, teachers, and friends, and have to adapt to new acquaintances.

Despite this, it remains etched in my childlike memory how I moved my wall drawings, then meticulously arranged my books inside a cardboard box, sealed and inscribed with my name. Then, in the last move, I amassed dozens of cardboard boxes that I had to ensure arrived safely. Alongside this, the harmonious clamor of my family, a blend of excitement for new experiences and potential yearning for sweeter, older days.

I still chuckle at myself when I recall feeling homeless in the period of preparing our new home. We had to sell the apartment we lived in to cover construction costs: new owners moved into the apartment, leaving us without shelter for two months until construction was finally complete.

During this time, we shared my brother's house. As always expected in our dear, besieged Gaza, the internet unexpectedly stopped working. I had to complete a marketing writing project, and submit a precisely crafted academic paper, along with other tasks, to complete my MA semester.

I needed a private space far from the turmoil of constant relocation, so resorted to renting an office in a co-working space, which I used whenever I needed.

When we relocated to our fifth home, none of us knew it would be our last happy move, nor that our long-awaited dream home would be snatched

from us less than a year later. When the Israeli army ordered us to flee to the south in October 2023, I took just one condensed bag of books, hoping to return in less than a week. Two years later, I saw it was a farewell glance and an unknowing prelude to genocide and forced displacement.

“The Path Meant for Us”

Throughout our displacement, the first house we found refuge in was my late grandfather Ibrahim’s—Abu Ziyad’s. Although he passed away nearly twenty years ago, I remember him vividly: short, thin, and bald. As an old-school Arabic teacher, he was known for his traditional, sometimes strict, methods of discipline. Yet with his children and grandchildren, he was gentle and kind.

His tenderness often took the form of poems and songs he wrote for each of us. During Eid gatherings at his house, he would recite them aloud, his voice filled with warmth and affection.

He also had a saying he repeated often: “We have walked the path meant for us, and whoever has such a path will walk it.” As a child, I never fully understood it, but I thought about it often.

When I think of my grandfather, I smell the fragrance of the garden that stretched across the land in front of his house—a garden bursting with flowers and vegetables, alive with the gentle clucking of the chickens and ducks he raised himself. I remember, too, the scent of sawdust from his carpentry workshop, where my uncles worked together.

I finally understood his proverb when we stayed in his home for eight months during the war. We had not come for a holiday to escape work or school. The family had gathered once again, but this time to flee for our lives. The North was no longer safe.

When we arrived, the land and the workshop had been overtaken by makeshift tents and temporary shelters. Standing there, I heard his words in my mind: “We’ve taken steps through our destined paths.” It was as if they had been written for us—for this moment—to return to his home without him, and without the life that had once filled it.

Dust and Fragments

While my room in our last home was a comfortable and productive study environment, the very concept of "home" disappeared the moment we arrived at our first place of displacement in Rafah.

At my grandfather Abu Ziyad's house, we stayed with two of my uncles' families. A mattress in the living room was all that was mine, and my only private space.

While here I received the devastating news that Dr. Refaat Alareer, my esteemed professor and supervisor, who was supposed to oversee the development of my MA thesis, had been assassinated on December 6, 2023, to silence his powerful voice. I only learned this several days later, as I had no internet nor even electricity in the intervening period.

I had a vivid dream, in which he visited and reproached my lack of academic progress. As soon as I woke up, I walked to the city center in search of a bookshop. I printed some of his published books and read them secretly or at night in a circle with my sisters.

Driven by a need to continue my journalistic work, I began the arduous tasks of charging my devices and re-establishing an internet connection. But every procurement attempt felt like navigating a perilous trial, and confronting the ever-present threat of an explosion, becoming nothing more than dust or fragments. This haunting thought shadowed my every step, frequently making me lose sight of where I was even headed.

I was displaced in Rafah, where my mom was born and raised. There I had the most memorable holidays. But now, in ongoing war, I could find no privacy there: The shared first floor was cramped and transparent, and all building residents had a clear view of what I was writing on my phone screen or in my small notebook.

I was fortunate to have many relatives' homes in Rafah, my parents' birthplace and first residence, and where they met and married. My eldest brother and three of my sisters were also born there. Afterwards, they moved to begin a new life in Gaza City, in the northern Strip. When we

were forcibly “returned” to Rafah, I discovered my aunts’ and uncles’ homes there, which were all open to receive me whenever I wished.

Before leaving my grandfather’s house, I would divide my tasks into “paper” and “digital.” My “paper” tasks were conducted in the large hall, where my mother created a sense of privacy by using a transparent curtain to create a sanctuary.

To alleviate the burden on my relatives, I visited them only occasionally to finish my “digital” tasks, being fully aware that their electricity sockets, intermittent internet connections, and mattresses were limited. Nevertheless, I carried a new notebook and toured every house where I knew there was a chance of finding intermittent electricity or internet.

In times like these, it was difficult for me to “count my blessings,” and it was far easier to don dark glasses. For example, in reflecting on the gathering of the entire family, I reflected that while we used to gather for joyful occasions, we now came together in a harsher circumstance, namely displacement in a genocide.

For eight months, I lamented the inadequacies of this dwelling. Yet, despite all its flaws, I was unaware that it would be the best shelter we would find in search of safer places within the occupied and constantly attacked city of Gaza. But despite it all, I was finally able to send an email, and with it, I published my first article in March 2024.

Seeking Knowledge and Refuge

After the ground invasion of Rafah in May 2024, we sought refuge in a fenced plot of land, where our three tents were pitched, sheltering under the shade of olive trees from the scorching sun. Our new displacement location is in the city of Deir Al-Balah, in central Gaza.

For another four months, I endured a profound longing for our last home in the northern part of the Strip, and with it, a deep yearning for my work and my private space that helped me to persist. Unbeknownst to me, each passing day brought me closer to returning, while also giving rise to different experiences and revealing new concepts of homelessness.

In Deir Al-Balah, I experienced how to spend a full month without work: no writing, reading, nor any hope of either. I then experienced another month desperately seeking work to survive and continue living, not to obtain luxuries nor work toward a new financial goal. Finally, in the last two months, I continued my education from inside a tent, working remotely via non-existent internet. I also taught the Quran to a circle of camp girls who gathered to seek knowledge.

I tried gathering dry palm leaves and lighting a fire to prepare a cup of coffee that would help me plan for an unknown day. I tried to take a final exam and follow course materials from inside a displacement tent.

I tried riding animal-drawn carts to finally reach internet networks 15 minutes from our tent, so I could download my lessons and lectures, and ultimately complete the semester.

And I tried to follow my lessons in the evening, after everyone had gone to sleep, transforming the shared space under the olive trees into my own individual workspace.

Under the olive trees, a fragrance of a home, I remembered the last book I had read, about a Brazilian child, Zezè, who moved to a new house and had to leave his beloved orange tree behind. When I read it in 2020, I recalled my first childhood home in the town of Jabaliya, which had a small garden filled with trees. I chose a loquat tree and named it “my tree,” and I grieved its parting deeply when we moved to another house. However, in this displacement camp, I remembered my forced relocation in my youth from my last house, which boasted pomegranate, palm, olive, and rose trees —all of them. I used to sit beneath them to write, to relay news, to study, to sing, or to draw. I consoled myself with the thought that I had at least managed to save my device and some of my books, and here I was, possessing a protective shade and a shelter, however temporary.

Pursuing my work as a journalist, I interviewed the girls I taught in my circle, documented their stories of the war, translated them into English, and attempted to publish them. I succeeded in publishing one.

I was able to follow the lessons of my Media Translation and Translation Stylistics courses. I studied while suffering from hepatitis and a bacterial infection in my eyes, in addition to severe sunburn. I studied while the occupation attempted to advance and storm Deir Al-Balah, thereby invading the very academic semester I was attempting to resume. They quashed my efforts once more. Priority became the imperative of saving our lives: a move to Khan Younis.

Special Celebration

We spent our first night in a shed my uncle, Dr. Ziyad Abu Tareq, rented from an acquaintance. Partially demolished and offering no respite from the summer heat, it at least served as a shelter. These and many other shortcomings notwithstanding, it was nonetheless better than the tents. We remained there until our tents were pitched under the scorching sun once again.

My uncle embraced us in the darkness of an August night when we arrived, and said: “Stay grateful, my dear, you arrived safely, you have transportation, you have your belongings, and you are all well, complete and whole.” We had just completed the arduous journey of a full day’s travel between the two cities, a journey that, before the war, would have taken no more than 15 minutes by car.

This was not what I expected upon seeing my uncle. Our conversations used to be vibrant and engaging, held over a cup of coffee in the garden of my family’s last home in the northern Strip. He would ask about my academic progress and advise me on the most crucial criteria for choosing a thesis title and for passing, not excelling in, my courses.

I still recall one evening in September 2023, when he advised me to focus on finishing my courses and thesis, while giving minimal consideration to creativity, which he advised me to save for my later works. Justifying this, he pointed to the tons of academic theses that he had reviewed, whose creativity and brilliance might conceivably have made a difference if they had seen the light of day anywhere other than the occupied Strip.

His advice did not resonate with me then, and I only grasped its true meaning when I was in Al-Buraq camp in Khan Younis. Here, reflecting on the thousands of creative methods for teaching that used the latest modern tools, including teaching through play and love, I found myself asking how they could be applied when the school is a mere tent that offers no protection from the heat, and receives no water or air, let alone electricity or internet? Paper, the most advanced teaching tool available, was usually conserved for lighting cooking fires and washing. Given this, how could studies and theses be applied?

By the time we were at least to some degree accustomed to the new dwelling, the final exams for the two courses I had been registered since September 2023 had already arrived.

In our five months in Khan Younis, I frequently made my way to Al-Aqsa Roundabout, the closest place outside the camp with a potential internet connection. My brothers tried to prevent me from going out, fearing the dangers, but my heart insisted: “If we do not choose our lives, we will choose the form of our death: to die while trying.” Despite this, my efforts were in vain, as internet access remained elusive.

Persevering, I managed to re-establish consistent and regular contact with the work team abroad and continue my work monitoring news from Gaza.

Sultan Hub, a small, caravan-like room that provided electricity and internet, and up to 20 tables, was the finest entrepreneur creation in the war. I got there after one-and-a-half hours of travel—half-hour walk, half-hour wait for transportation, and half-hour stuck in traffic—to find the place already crowded—and then had wait beside a table for it to become vacant. Nonetheless, I finalized an academic paper and took a final exam here.

Sultan became my refuge, and the refuge of every student of knowledge who could manage to pay everything they owned for a ride via an animal-drawn cart and slow internet, existing in a present no clearer than an unknown future.

In the last month we spent in Khan Younis, I learned about the existence of Al-Hilal Hub, another place closer to our camp, which held out the prospect of saving on transportation costs, and even being able to afford a cup of coffee while studying. I went to the "Hub" on January 9, 2025, to submit my final exam, only to find a ceasefire announced by swelling joyous shouts. Loudspeakers chimed with delight at "victory"—"truce, truce, truce!!" The voices of young and old echoed everywhere, including the edges of the camps, and around the internet tent where I sat. I don't know why or how I managed to finish.

But then a notification flashed across my screen: "Family group: May God compensate you with good, your house is burnt!" Our home in the north was now ashes. Tears streamed down my face . . . I did not want to celebrate my MA certificate in a burnt home.

My Mother, My Home

During my stays in Rafah, Deir Al-Balah, and Khan Younis, I measured the quality of my dwellings by a simple standard: if a place could embrace my intellectual activities, I considered it good. It had to be spacious enough to contain my mental chaos, yet small enough to keep it hidden.

None of the places met that standard—but my mother made them so. She would hang dark curtains to divide the hall, creating a small room of my own. Over time, I realized that my grandfather, despite his strict teaching methods, had raised a daughter who became a kind caretaker, whose pedagogy was love.

My mother, Samar—Um Mohammed—now 56, is one of those rare women who never cared much for numbers. Ask her age, and she might answer "sixty-six," shrugging off the question as if it were unimportant. She married at 19, a freshman in the Arabic department at the Islamic University of Gaza, aspiring to be an Arabic language teacher like her father.

Raised in a house filled with books and grammar, with a father who taught Arabic and brothers who headed university departments, she inherited and nurtured an unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

She has been a teacher by nature for as long as I can remember—my first teacher, my first writer, my first multitasker. Even before she earned her degree in education, she had raised ten children by the age of 38.

By the time my eldest sister, Nour, turned 19 and was ready to enter university, my father's business had finally become stable. Nour enrolled at the Islamic University of Gaza, and my mother was encouraged to return to her own studies. She earned her BA in Islamic Education, then her MA in Islamic Pedagogy.

Since her graduation, she has never stopped teaching. In public schools and local universities, she touched the lives of countless students, planting a love of knowledge in every heart she encountered—and most deeply in mine.

My mother deserved a peaceful rest in what we believed would be the house of a lifetime—a home that burned to the ground only months after it was built. Instead, in her later years, she has endured the hardship of constant displacement. In the makeshift tents we set up in the South, she urged everyone to study and memorize the Holy Quran, founding a carefully planned Quran center. Even through multiple evacuations, she managed to create a rich learning environment whose impact will be remembered far beyond the tents—across the entire Strip.

Remnants of Home

On the humiliating journey from the south to the north, we slept several nights at checkpoints. This felt like a return trip home after an indefinite vacation at my grandmother's house, followed by camping in vast open lands. We faced death, escaping unharmed from numerous traffic accidents on the crowded roads. I was utterly unable to even think about the next step in my academic life, as our focus at this time was simply on surviving for several days without food, drink, and other necessities.

As we return to rubble, I count my victories. I passed my final two courses, published a few articles, and resumed my work with my media team.

As a woman from Gaza, I felt compelled to do this, as it would be deeply shameful to weep over a room, even one that I had spent my childhood and part of my youth willing to be my sanctuary, safety, very own place. And even if I had been deprived of completing my MA journey within my room, why could I not celebrate my graduation there?

Many blamed me for spending my savings on higher education in Gaza, just as they blamed my father for spending his savings on building a house here. But I found this criticism unjustified and even perverse: after all, is a homeland not the most deserving place for investment and construction?

A Father's Dream

My father is 62 now. He spent his youth and much of his health trying to save enough to build his dream home. A refugee from the village of Hatta, he started his life with my mother at the age of 26 in a tiny room in his parents' home. Since then, he has dreamed of a wider house. Before earning any degree, he worked inside the occupied territories, taking any job that brought a brick closer to the house he envisioned—gardener, carpenter, builder. Afterward, he pursued a BA in commerce and dedicated his career to managing various offices at the Islamic University of Gaza.

When everything he had built was reduced to dust—our home flattened by Israeli airstrikes—he retired not just from work, but from the world. Now, he spends his days archiving pieces of that lost life on his old computer, collecting memories like a man trying to reassemble a shattered mirror, one file at a time.

We arrived in the north, and disembarked amidst the rubble of our home. The first floor was burnt and most of the second, including what was once my room, was gone, with the wall that used to overlook the shade tree in our neighbor Abu Samir's garden entirely collapsed; my books were riddled with bullets; the wooden door, once a barrier against the noise of the house and the grandchildren, was broken.

All noise intertwined, as the houses opened onto each other, spilling out their stories, secrets, dreams, and aspirations.

Like all families here in Gaza, we attempted to mend our lives. I gathered what remained of my scattered dreams, including my new pink desk, which now seemed to carry a sense of disappointment. My brothers dragged it to a new dwelling, where it became displaced from its homeland, destined to continue its work in a place geographically and emotionally distant from home.

By regularizing my work somewhat, I managed to save what I could to buy books again, and the necessary stationery, notebooks, and pens to continue my learning. Perhaps, I now reflected, I could now begin the required procedures for writing my Master's thesis?

But then reality ambushed me. On March 18, Israel violated the truce, and we circled back into the same vicious cycle. Even this last corner of mine, which had miraculously survived, was now threatened with shelling and obliteration once more.

As the sound of the drone hummed ominously above my head, I looked at the remnants of my damaged, displaced desk, and contemplated how the genocide had stolen my academic progress, forcing me to postpone semesters and miss lectures. All of this was against my will, and entirely due to the occupation.

I was not only deprived of my own home but also my second home at the university, where I used to seek refuge, seeking out its spacious buildings connected to the internet and electricity. Now, I could no longer recognize the street of my university, despite having spent more than seven years there. The streets, once filled with roses and trees, were now a bulldozed desert, and the university was a displacement camp.

In Another Life

How can I weep over the loss of a room and the loss of my youth? How can I cry for four years spent in a Master's program, still postponed to this day? Years that would have sufficed to complete a doctorate, but outside Gaza. I remember that my Bachelor's colleagues who enrolled in the Master's program in the same year as me have already graduated, defended their theses, and secured new jobs.

Now, in this place, I sit on the rubble of dreams killed in their infancy. If I had a choice, I would return to our fifth home, where I would walk the corridors and rooms like a shadow, with no onlooker knowing anything about me, except that I am the daughter of Abu Mohammed, the neighbor who allows his daughters to study and work outside.

But now, with no such recourse, I live in the corner of a room, seeking refuge in what remains of my relatives' homes. My relatives in the city center and Tal Al-Hawa, along with many of the residents of the buildings they live in, now know if I need to attend to an exam, monthly report, seminar, and/or submission.

In another life, I will keep all my notebooks and not distribute them to my cousins to guard against them being lost when I evacuate to another displacement camp. In this life, no one will brand me insane for diligently pursuing knowledge at a time of genocide. Achieving excellent grades will not be for nothing, mere ink on paper. In this life, I will write about anything else but mere survival, including the ongoing Israeli attempt to exterminate my people.

Shaimaa Eid

The Profound Witness

As the Gaza genocide commenced, Shaimaa Eid found herself and her family immediately on the run, their harrowing journey across the Strip marked only by the comforting echo of her uncle's national melodies. Despite the acute danger emanating from every corner, Shaimaa assigned herself the crucial, terrifying role of the Witness, documenting the quieter, more enduring stories of love, devastating loss, and tenacious sumud. Unlike traditional war reporters focused on the immediate conflict, Shaimaa prioritized conveying the voice of the people: those crammed in hospitals, desperately seeking answers in front of mosques, or kneeling over the bodies of loved ones. Her profound version of reporting—focused not merely on the event of war but on the intimate human response to extermination—makes her narrative an essential literary and historical document.

Love in the Time of Genocide

I AM NOT crafting these lines from an editorial room, nor an elegant office, but from a small corner in our home, battered by bombardment. We are striving to reclaim it, through the collective efforts of our family and the unyielding patience of hope. I am writing from amidst the temporary shelters, where the cries of children blend with the moans of the wounded, and the scent of dust clings to the air, an ever-present companion.

I was preparing a report on complex cases of physical therapy at Al-Wafa Hospital, for wounded who had lost limbs or memory in the Israeli war on the Strip. There, it was not the wail of ambulances that dominated the air, but faint groans, hesitant footsteps, and faces searching for a flicker of life: a hand that might stir, an eye that might turn, or a name uttered after a long silence.

And there, amidst the scattered beds and rehabilitation equipment, I encountered Asmaa al-Sultan. She was not merely an old friend, but a living reflection of my own memories. This was no longer a journalistic pursuit for a "scoop," but a story that gripped my very being.

I saw Asmaa by chance. She was seated on a broken plastic chair, which was broken and had one leg precariously tied with a worn piece of cloth to maintain balance. Beside her, on a mobile bed, lay a man utterly still. His eyes were open but vacant, his head swathed in gauze, his chest barely rising.

No introductions were needed. I sat beside her, and she extended her hand as if to say: "I awaited your arrival." She lifted her gaze to mine, and in a voice so faint it seemed to emanate from a great distance, she said: "I called him: Jameel . . . he turned his face towards me . . . but he didn't know me. It was as if he was seeing me for the very first time in his life."

In that moment, I knew the story had truly begun. Not just a tale of injury, but a narrative of collapsing memory, and a woman fiercely trying to prevent her love from utter disintegration.

Asmaa continued, her voice faltering: "Now, he doesn't even know his own name. I call him, he doesn't respond. I place my hand on his heart, and it remains still. No home, no memory, not even prayer . . . yet his eyes weep day and night, searching for something lost, and never finding it."

Then she clutched my hand tightly and said: "Shaimaa, write. Write about us. Not as a news report . . . but as a human cry. Let people understand that war doesn't just slaughter bodies; war massacres memory, and life's span, and the very existence that flourished between two people who loved each other."

At that moment, everything changed.

This was not merely a story I documented; it was a narrative whose details I lived alongside her, day by day, gaze by gaze, pain by pain. I did not write it to lament, but to bear witness to how the women of this region forge a love that remains undefeated, and a patience that will not break.

Jameel, Asmaa's husband, was not injured in battle, nor while bearing arms, but as he went to offer condolences for his close friend, Waseem Mubarak, who had been martyred with his family.

On March 19, 2024, the mourning house was entirely obliterated by occupation aircraft, leading to a massacre: 24 martyrs and dozens wounded.

Yet amidst the rubble, a brutal miracle of survival unfolded. . . . Jameel had escaped death, but emerged with the most profound absence imaginable: the absence of memory.

A fragment of an Israeli missile lodged in his head causing severe brain damage and a prolonged coma. When Jameel finally awoke, his memory had vanished, never to return. He remembered neither Asmaa, nor his home, nor even his own name. He was alive yet utterly absent, his eyes open without truly seeing, breathing without true sensation, and existing without knowing who he was.

And Asmaa, that woman who lost almost everything, did not lose her faith in him. She held his hand whenever she sensed him drifting further away. She would read him verses from the holy Quran, show him photographs of their wedding, and patiently repeat the names of their children during every visit, as if attempting to reconstruct his scattered memory, piece by painstaking piece.

She told me once: "Sometimes, when I touch his hand, I see his eye blink as if he's remembering me, but then in a fleeting moment, everything is gone. But I am a stubborn Gazan woman, and I will persevere through this journey with him."

This is the essence of love in Gaza. It does not demand poetry; it demands unwavering patience. It's not measured by gifts, but by tears

secretly wiped away. It's not proven by words, but by remaining present beside one who doesn't even recognize you.

Exodus

The story began when we commenced our forced journey from the northern Gaza Strip after the occupation dropped evacuation leaflets on the morning of October 13, 2023. The evacuation was not as it appeared in the news. There was no luxurious tent on the beach or swift passage. Instead, it was a journey marked by the agonizing slowness of wounds, burdened by panic and the unknown, where each of us walked a different path, yet the pain was universally shared.

I, Shaimaa, left with my family: my father Marwan, my mother Fadwa, my siblings Marwa and Hafez, and my uncle Haider's family, his wife Rafqa and their daughters Haifa and Salma. All of us crammed into one car, though our number far exceeded its capacity, making movement stifling and arduous, especially for my father who had just undergone delicate heart surgery days prior, and desperately needed fresh air, oxygen, and ample space to breathe comfortably.

We departed, carrying our fathers, our children, and our memories. My father leaned on my arms when we were forced to alight or stop, and my siblings carried what remained of our belongings. Every step felt like a re-enactment of our grandparents' *Nakba*. We wept at the sight throughout the journey, as if memory itself was walking within us.

As for Asmaa, she relocated from Al-Salateen neighborhood, west of Beit Lahia, shortly after the temporary truce ended on November 30, 2023. We weren't together, yet we endured the same anguish.

During that period when Asmaa migrated, the occupation had imposed stringent restrictions on the movement of its residents, preventing movement across Salah al-Din axis and Al-Rashid Street by car, and forcing people to walk from the north to the south of the Strip, passing through humiliating checkpoints and detention barriers, with heavily armed Israeli soldiers stationed on both sides of the road, scrutinizing every step.

Asmaa clutched her young daughter Tuqa, while Kamal and Hanan walked beside their father, Jameel. Jameel had not yet been injured, but his features were heavy with fear and exhaustion. He tried to distract his children with stories of trees and birds that had survived the bombardment, steering their gaze away from the muzzles of rifles, embracing them during shelling, and made his arms a sanctuary on cold nights within the school where they sought refuge.

We—my family and I—arrived in Rafah, at a relative's house overflowing with displaced people. We slept on the floor, sharing scarce food and water. My mother insisted on feeding the children first, and my father, despite his illness, kept repeating: "The homeland is still strong, just be patient." And my uncle Haider—my closest friend to my heart—always hummed for us beautiful revolutionary songs that eased the pain of our forced movement:

Your son implores you, O hero, usher in our dawn.
Your son implores you, O hero, bring us triumph.
Your son proclaims, your revolution charts the destined path,
And discerns, my father, both foe and ally.

Everything within us was fleeting, except for the pain, which remained an unwavering presence.

Into the Unknown

Asmaa and her family settled in a UNRWA school in central Gaza's Deir Al-Balah, in a cramped room with no water, no electricity, and no proper bedding. Despite this, she strove to live, to persevere, to shield her children from complete collapse. And in the heart of this cruel scene, Jameel was by her side, never leaving her for a moment, supporting her through the intricacies of daily life that had become more complex and brutal than ever before.

Jameel stayed composed for his wife and children, resourcefully finding food here and there, and moving between water queues, trying with all his

might to secure milk for their little daughter Tuqa, the tiny one who could no longer find diapers her size, or even a bottle of fever medicine. Her simplest needs became rare in the markets, and if found, they were at exorbitant prices that the displaced could not bear.

Every morning, Jameel would leave the school into the unknown, knocking on the doors of relief organizations, asking for flour, for water, for anything to sustain them. Sometimes he would return empty-handed, but he never ceased trying. Asmaa would look at him with unspoken gratitude, for he was the one who kept her from breaking down, and gave her an additional reason to endure.

Asmaa told me in one of our meetings that “everyone in the school came to know our story. But they don’t know the details .. they don’t know that Jameel doesn’t like tea, and that he remembers our wedding date better than I do, and that he used to cry silently if one of our children fell ill. He is not just my husband; he is my life amidst this destruction.”

Every night, Jameel would sit beside his children, recounting stories of abandoned villages, of the sea, and of the dreamlike mornings of Beit Lahia. And in the heart of the school, amidst the crowding, fear, and utter lack of privacy, he tried to fashion a small space of safety for them, a semblance of home. That homeland from which they were repeatedly forced to flee, but which they never truly departed from their hearts.

Our friendship was not forged in the crucible of war, nor was it born from a new catastrophe. Asmaa and I have known each other since our high school days, when we would carve out moments of hope from time, and dream of a future untouched by devastation. I lived with her the most beautiful details of her life; I witnessed her love story with Jameel, their simple, warm wedding, the birth of their first child Kamal, Hanan’s first faltering steps in her mother’s embrace, and Tuqa’s first cry as she entered life amidst the siege.

Just as we were inseparable in every moment, she was also with me when we received our high school results. Although they were announced at the same time, she chose to postpone her celebration and prioritize mine,

as if my success mattered more to her than her own. This is the Asmaa I know, who gives joy before seeking it, and loves with a profound sincerity, without measure.

“Palestine”

Then the war came, heavy and relentless, deepening and solidifying our friendship even further. We tried to ease each other’s burdens of relocation and loss. She visited me where we had taken refuge after the war machine forced us to abandon Rafah and move once more. We then headed to Mawasi Al-Qarara, where my family owns a small plot of land we call “Palestine,” simply because it so closely resembles it. It reminded me of my hometown, Zarnouqa, in the Ramla district, from which the occupation forcibly expelled us in 1948. Amidst the palm trees and fig bushes, I conjured scenes from a childhood I hadn’t lived, but which are etched in my memory from my grandfather Hafez’s stories. It was the same scent, the same air, as if the earth itself remembered its children and awaited their return.

The land was verdant, filled with trees and flowers, bearing pomegranates and olives. In the shade of its palm trees, we felt as if we had returned, if only for a fleeting moment, to the villages they had denied us. Before the war, it was our sanctuary, a place we fled to escape the clamor of our city—a clamor we now long for. And after the war, it became our second refuge, where we sought solace whenever the tents became too cramped and the smell of death grew more intense.

Asmaa was saddened by the hardship of our second forced movement, yet she rejoiced because the distance between us had shrunk; she was living in Deir Al-Balah, and was now only a 15-minute walk from me along the seashore.

When we were relocated, along with most residents of the northern Gaza Strip, to what Israel termed a “safe zone,” we had no idea that this very spot would transform into the stage for the most abhorrent massacres. We thought we had escaped death, but death lay in wait for us there, within

suffocating population densities and flimsy tents that offered no protection from danger.

We would awaken at night to the sounds of explosions, the whine of rockets, and the screams of children burning alive inside their tents from the ferocity of the bombing. Sand would cascade over our heads, engulfing the tents from the sheer force of the explosions. Sleep and safety became alien concepts to us. Even the darkness was not deep enough to conceal the terror of those nights.

In one of our conversations with Asmaa, we spoke extensively about the suffering of being displaced, and specifically about the loss of privacy. She told me, as she gazed at a tattered tent pitched by its owners near the beach of Deir Al-Balah: “Shaimaa, what pains me most is that women here no longer possess any private space. Everything has become exposed, even our deepest pain.”

“Women have been stripped of their most basic needs, from hygiene products to the simplest human rights. Families share tightly packed tents, or cramped rooms within shelters, sometimes separated by a fragile cloth curtain that shields neither sight nor sound. Families who once lived in independent homes now share air, food, and breaths with strangers.”

The conversation with Asmaa was a collective confession, imbued with a profound sense of betrayal. Betrayal from a world that silently observes us, and from a war that has left nothing untouched. Not homes, not bodies, not even privacy.

Breakdown

In the middle of the period of forced movement, family pains began to overwhelm Asmaa. One day, she called me, her voice heavy with sorrow, barely audible, and said: “Shaimaa, my brother and beloved Amer was martyred with his wife and daughters, and he remains under the rubble even now.”

Amer, the brother who steadfastly refused to abandon the northern Gaza Strip, chose to remain with his family despite the bombardment, and clung

to his home until the very last moment. Then warplanes targeted the house, giving them no time to escape or even bid farewell, and it collapsed upon him, also killing his wife and daughters.

Due to my profound friendship with Asmaa, I always felt that her siblings were my own. Amer was not merely her brother; he was the mischievous young man who embraced life, cared meticulously for his appearance, and adored fashion and elegant attire. He brought a joyous presence wherever he went. And today, he had departed in silence, he, his wife, and his children, without even the opportunity to bid farewell to his body or imprint a final kiss on his forehead.

Her words on the phone condensed the inexpressible: the agony of loss, the shock of sudden departure, and the crushing weight of powerlessness against a vile, merciless occupation. And all that remained of her at this moment was a broken breath striving to persist, clinging to patience.

Asmaa is not alone. The loss of a brother, sister, child, and home has become a universal reality in this war-torn land, sparing no one. Amer, a son of this land, was born into its wounds, and clung to it until his last breath, just as his ancestors did before him when they chose to remain in the face of slaughter and expulsion. In this place, every home is threatened with becoming breaking news. And every farewell is deferred, for fear it might be the last.

In this genocide, not only combatants are targeted, but entire families, homes, memories, and everything that embodies life. A war that leaves behind not merely survivors, but broken survivors, recounting tales of those who remained beneath the rubble, of those who never returned, and of those who were exactly like us.

Here, war is not just bombardment but an attempt to erase existence itself. But just as they failed to extinguish the memory of the *Nakba*, they will also fail to bury this land beneath the ruins. Because Asmaa, and those like her, do not narrate death . . . rather, they breathe life into it, through testimony and through enduring.

No family in the Gaza Strip has escaped the bitter taste of loss, the anguish of displacement, and the oppression of tents, along with the diseases and pains they bring. War doesn't just claim lives through bombing; it slowly erodes us through the inhumane conditions we are compelled to live in.

On one of the agonizing nights of our displacement, my younger sister Marwa and I contracted hepatitis. This was not surprising, as the displacement environment was ripe for all kinds of epidemics, especially with the occupation preventing the entry of cleaning materials and disinfectants. The disease served as an additional biological weapon, with which the occupation sought to complete what its rockets and bombs had failed to achieve.

Severely emaciated, we made our way to a small medical point inside the camp. The doctor looked at us with eyes of helplessness and informed us that he possessed no medicine, not even the most basic resources. He told us that we had to isolate ourselves, and that a private toilet was essential. He said this knowing full well that such a request was a cruel fantasy.

The room we were sheltering in on our land in Al-Mawasi had only one toilet, and approximately 12 of us used it daily. As for the neighboring camp, which housed over 40 families, it had only two toilets. Water was scarce, and the queues in front of the bathrooms were unending. Children and the elderly stood for hours, awaiting their turn to relieve themselves. We were living an indescribable health and psychological breakdown. But harder than the illness itself was our feeling that we were fighting alone, without medicine or a voice, and that our bodies had become a battleground for an open, unceasing war.

Asmaa spoke to me about the same ordeal, and how her young daughter Hanan began to suffer from enuresis due to the constant terror, and the ceaseless sounds of bombing and explosions. It wasn't just the horror that weighed on her heart, but also the gritty details of daily life in the shelters.

> “Hanan . . . every night she wakes up crying and screaming. She wets her bed from fear. The sound of bombing never leaves her, and the fire belt around us hasn’t allowed her to feel safe for a single moment.”

The small child, barely five years old, stood in the bathroom queue with dozens of other children. She waited her turn while her tiny body trembled from the cold, fear, and exhaustion. Each time, Asmaa tried to manage the situation, but the child began to lose control.

> “I started rushing to change her, washing her clothes by hand, and water is scarce. There are no diapers, nor can I afford to buy them every day. I even grew ashamed to hang the laundry, with everyone around us.”

She said this while clutching the edge of her shawl, as if trying to conceal the utter brokenness that had, against her will, seeped from her.

Every night, she tried to convince Hanan that things were fine, that the rockets had moved away, and that the morning was safe, but she was lying, and she knew that war knew no morning, and had no mercy on mothers.

A Sky without Drones

The displaced in the displacement camps lived for the news of a truce, anticipating it as if it were a lifeline. They followed every news item, every whisper, every leaked detail conveyed through radios or dilapidated phones. “The Israeli delegation arrived in Doha,” “left Doha,” “a Hamas delegation arrived in Cairo,” “left Cairo.” These phrases resonated throughout the camp, just as mothers’ prayers echo before sleep.

Among the tents, discussions of a ceasefire became a daily ritual. We whispered it when bread was distributed, we repeated it as we lined up for water and aid, and we commented on it in solemn silence whenever we heard a nearby explosion.

We had a charming young neighbor named Moataz al-Abadla, a light-hearted child whose spirit shone brightly despite the war. Every morning, when he saw me leaving for my journalistic work, he would approach with hesitant steps and whisper in his small voice:

"Aunt Shaimaa . . . is there a truce?"

He asked with eyes that held more hope than curiosity. He wasn't awaiting a political report, but simply a word to reassure him . . . a moment of hope to rekindle his belief that this war might someday cease.

And after a long period of eager anticipation, the news that Moataz and others like him yearned for arrived: an announcement of a lull and a ceasefire, and most importantly, permission for the displaced to return to the northern Gaza Strip.

The news spread like wildfire among the tents, people exchanging it as if it were the breath of life itself. Faint ululations erupted from the throats of mothers, and the tears of men mingled with the laughter of children, which had regained some of its youthful boldness. People cautiously exchanged congratulations, as if testing the words anew: "Truce . . . open windows . . . a sky without drones . . . a night without fire belts and explosions."

Moataz no longer needed to ask me in the morning; instead, he would be the one to bring me the good news, leaping through the narrow passages of the camp and enthusiastically shouting:

"Aunt Shaimaa . . . you're going back to the north!"

In the first moments of the ceasefire announcement, Asmaa called me, and her voice was a mix of joy and a long, drawn-out sigh. Beside her, I heard Jameel's voice and the children joining in the congratulations. Then Hanan leaped forward to say with an innocence that pierced my heart with joy:

"And finally, we'll eat chocolate and chicken!"

Asmaa told me she was waiting for the date when residents would be allowed to return to the northern Strip, and we agreed to walk back together along the coastal Rashid Street, which was opened to returnees on the condition that passage was only on foot.

But that was not the sole route; private vehicles were also permitted to cross through Salah al-Din Road, after a checkpoint was established, managed by a multinational force consisting of three private companies: two American and one Egyptian. This force was responsible for inspecting cars heading from the south of the Strip towards its north.

On the morning of January 27, we arrived in the northern Gaza Strip after a grueling journey we covered on foot for nearly eight continuous hours. The sheer longing eased the burden of exhaustion, propelling us forward despite everything.

But the scene that greeted us was even more devastating than we could have possibly imagined. Along the coastal Rashid Road, our eyes saw nothing but destruction, ruin, and revenge in its most heinous forms. This coastal strip had been the visage of the city, where all its familiar landmarks had vanished. I searched desperately for my favorite rest stop, where we used to gather for family sessions after a demanding week of work, but I found only a faint, obliterated trace, erased by tanks. Without exaggeration, not a single place along the Rashid line remained standing.

I was consumed by a state of profound depression and despair. I tried to deny it, but the city was sorrowful in a way that words cannot describe. Buildings lay in ruins, and the stench of bodies still beneath the rubble permeated the streets. Homes were dilapidated, and the streets had become mere shifting sand, nothing resembling what once was.

During the temporary ceasefire, the beleaguered city and its people made valiant efforts to rise again. People began to repair what they could of their damaged homes, and we returned to our houses to rekindle life within them, despite the scars left by the occupation’s shells on most of them. Asmaa told me that her house was no longer habitable, but she was resolute in her determination to restore it and rebuild anew. And with time, life

gradually began to filter back into the neighborhoods and among neighbors, despite all we had been through in terms of pain and destruction.

But the occupation, true to its nature, is criminal and abhorrent; it detests seeing this place thrive, it detests seeing life stirring anew despite all it has destroyed. On the night of March 18, it decided to unleash the nightmare once more, declaring the return of war as if the blood had not yet dried.

He Wrote My Name

I was sleeping then, like many people in our area who could not return to deep sleep, haunted by the nightmares of war. We would awaken in the middle of the night, startled by a heavy dream: bombs, rockets, planes circling above us. But that night, the nightmare was no dream; it was reality. The planes returned to bomb the Gaza Strip from north to south, mercilessly.

Netanyahu then emerged to coldly announce: “The resumption of the war on the Gaza Strip.” As if the curses of the night were insufficient, he added a fresh wound to our already open ones.

My communication with Asmaa was severed for a period after our return to the North. Everyone at that time was immersed in the arduous task of rebuilding what remained of demolished houses, securing daily necessities, fetching water, and removing rubble with their exhausted hands. From dawn until dusk, our days held no room for rest; everything demanded double effort and agonizing patience.

Circumstances of my work led me to encounter her by chance at Al-Wafa Hospital, where Jameel lay after his injury. From that moment, I did not leave her side. I made sure to remain in constant contact with her, checking on Jameel, and inquiring about the children, as if we had found in each other a small comfort to cling to amidst this profound devastation.

After months Jameel spent in Al-Wafa Hospital for rehabilitation, during which he began to move his fingers and toes with great difficulty, the doctors, under immense pressure and increasing numbers of wounded,

decided to discharge him to make his bed available for another patient in greater need. And so Jameel left the hospital, only to be moved to a tent in the street. Jameel, who suffers from severe brain damage, can only eat through a tube in his nose, and lacks the strength to move or stand. He was sent to a tent that offered no protection from the harsh summer heat or the cruelty of life surrounding him.

One time, I sat with them inside their tent as evening descended, and darkness enveloped it, so they relied on the faint glow of a mobile phone. Tuqa, the two-year-old child, hugged a small plastic bag containing a few items her father Jameel had bought for her before he was injured. She didn't comprehend what had happened to him, but she sat beside him, whispering in her small voice: "Baba, open your bag, let's eat the candy together."

On another occasion, Kamal, the eldest son, sat at his father's feet, speaking to him about school, about his friends, about his dream of becoming a doctor so he could restore his father's memory. He was attempting the impossible. But what he did was enough to fill the heart.

Jameel's mother held a plastic tray in her hand, waving it above his face, trying to ward off the swarms of flies that offered him no respite, even in his illness, nor the summer heat that besieged his frail body inside the tent. Her eyes implored him to turn, to offer a small glance of gratitude that might rekindle a spark of hope in her heart. Beside him, the father sat reciting the Quran in a trembling voice, bringing the holy book close to his ear, as if trying to plant a verse in his soul that would reopen a window of light amidst all this gloom.

Asmaa, in all those moments, was the bridge. Bearing the weight of everything. The pain, the memory, the hope, and the fear.

I once asked her: "Do you believe he will return?"

She said: "Not just belief, but absolute conviction. Jameel will return. I will make him love me anew, I will make him choose me again. This is love in the time of genocide. No luxury, no indulgence. But a profound act of creation."

Then she added, her voice beginning to falter: “I want him to awaken and see Palestine liberated. To return together to Na’lia, to his maternal grandfather’s land. For the Adhan to be raised once more in his ancestors’ mosque. This dream will not fall.”

In the backdrop of all these scenes, the history of our city whispered to me: Since 1948, this territory has known no true calm. Neither its sea, nor its camps. Neither its houses built over rubble, nor the hearts of its people, which have become citadels of patience. From the Battle of Karameh, to the *Intifadas*, to the siege, to the continuous massacres and genocide. . . . It was not only a victim, but always a martyr and a witness, and despite it all, it continues to build, to raise, and to love.

Jameel is the scion of this narrative. His father and family were among the first to establish the neighborhoods of Beit Lahia. Jameel read the *Nakba* to his children as he read Surat Al-Fatiha. It wasn’t just a distant memory; it was a living present.

In many moments, I saw that Asmaa was not merely recounting a love story. Rather, she was asserting: We are here. I am a refugee, and besieged, and a mother of three children in whom I have instilled the profound love of Palestine, but I will not vanish. We will not be erased.

On my last visit to her, she held my hand and said: “Jameel wrote a word yesterday. He wrote: Asmaa.”

Then she burst into tears. For the first time since we met, I heard her audibly cry.

She said: “He returned. He returned, even if only for a little while. He returned because I didn’t abandon him. He returned because I stayed.”

I am Shaimaa Eid.

I write because the story is not finished. Because war kills the body, but we rebuild the soul.

I write because love in our homeland is resistance.

And because I saw Jameel write “Asmaa.”

So I will continue to write . . . until he writes to her:

“I remembered you . . . and we returned to Palestine.”

Maphaz Ahmad Yousef

Witness and Voice of Gaza

Maphaz Yousef grew up in the shadow of the Nakba, a word she first learned from her grandmother, a survivor who dreamed of returning to her home and garden in Palestine. Maphaz's life has been defined by cycles of war, loss, and the enduring meaning of "genocide," which she witnesses anew in the 2023 war.

Though based abroad, her roots remain in Gaza. She channeled her grief over her family's displacement, the bombing of her childhood home, and the tragic loss of her best friend, Salma, into a commitment to bear witness. Maphaz continues to resist enforced silence, speaking out against the violence that reaches beyond Gaza's borders, impacting even her husband, a scholar who was unjustly detained for advocating for Palestine. She remains determined to carry forward the memory and defiance of her people.

That Familiar Word

THE WORD "GENOCIDE" was never foreign to me. Long before the world began using it in relation to Gaza, I had heard it many times, first from my grandmother. She spoke of it in the context of the *Nakba*, recounting the horror and heartbreak of those devastating days.

My grandmother was a survivor, not only of the *Nakba* but of four brutal wars. She lived her entire life carrying one enduring, unfulfilled dream: to return to her home. Her home was more than just a place; it was a

vivid tapestry of memories, and she painted it for us with words so clear I can still see it.

She described the daily rituals: how they fetched water from the well, how the kitchen teemed with the aroma of cooking, and how the trees stood tall around the house, like a loving family protecting the home.

She spoke of her small garden as her pride, a piece of life and resilience amid turmoil. I even have a video of her, sitting quietly before she begins to speak. She takes a deep breath, a tear forming in her eye, the moment she unlocks the door to her memories. Her stories were never mere words; they were windows into her soul. As she spoke, I could feel her pain coursing through me. Raw. Immediate.

"*Ya sitty*, what shall I tell you? Where shall I start? Our home was so beautiful, full of life. I used to take care of my little garden with all kinds of vegetables, tomatoes, green chili, eggplants, mint, and maramia." Those words carry the weight of a lifetime, the deep longing of a woman uprooted but never broken, whose memories still bloom like the garden she once tended.

She left this world holding onto one last, unfulfilled wish of returning to her home. She would often say, "If I die before I see it again, please carry my body back to my home." When she passed, tears welled up in her eyes, her heart shattered by the pain of exile and loss. She left behind not only a lifetime of memories but also the silent ache of a dream that was never realized. Her spirit remains intertwined with the land she loved so deeply, a poignant reminder of what was taken and what continues to endure in the hearts of those who remember.

My grandmother's story is not just a personal memory; it is a testament to the resilience of a people who have endured unimaginable loss and yet continue to hold onto hope.

The word "genocide" echoes through generations, not only as a label of suffering but as a call to remember, to bear witness, and to resist erasure. My grandmother's dreams, her garden, her home, all symbolize the enduring spirit of Palestine itself: deeply rooted, fiercely alive, and

unbroken. Though she is gone, her legacy lives on in every story shared, every memory preserved, and every heart that yearns for justice and return.

When she was forced to flee with her eight children, she was not searching for a destination, but rather for temporary safety, hoping to return home as soon as the bombs stopped falling. But they never did. Indeed, shells continued to fall all around them as they walked. They joined thousands, forced to abandon their villages, forced to abandon life as they knew it.

But that word, genocide, followed me throughout my childhood. It echoed in my grandmother's voice, and now I hear it again in my mother's. Her story mirrors her mother's, only harsher, bloodier. The ongoing genocide in Gaza is something even the entire alphabet cannot express. No sentence can carry the weight of that pain.

On October 7, 2023, when the war began, my father was in Egypt, returning from a trip. I begged him to stay there. I told him it's safer. But he said, "No. I want to be with your mother and your siblings and the people of Gaza. My homeland needs me in these dark days."

He returned to Gaza on October 9, fully aware that this war was unlike any before. He told me, "I have spent half of my life outside Palestine. Now, when my people need me most, I must be here. If I am to die, let it be on this land. I want to be buried next to my mother and my brother, Ashraf."

And so he returned, not alone, but with the burden of responsibility. Our relatives fled south, seeking safety in Rafah. Our home became a shelter for tens of them. The nearby park turned into a displacement camp. My father coordinated food and tents for thousands, turning chaos into a fragile sense of order. Our neighborhood, once quiet, was filled with people, relatives, strangers, all bound by war and uncertainty. They shared the same fear, the same desperation.

When foreign passport holders were allowed to evacuate, I could have used my American passport to get them out and to safety. As an American, I could have brought them to safety. But they refused. They knew the

horrors that awaited them, yet they chose to stay. “If we leave, who will remain?” my mother said. “What will we do if we leave Gaza? This is our land. Here, we live. Here, we will die.”

I was terrified for them, but I was proud, too. My parents stood tall, resilient, rooted. I cannot imagine how it would have felt like if they had fled and left my siblings behind. In Gaza, we have a saying: “Death with a group is mercy.” I understand it now.

Every day, the news from Gaza brings unbearable horror: people burned alive in their own homes; children taken in cold blood, their innocent lives shattered before they even had a chance to dream; entire neighborhoods turned to dust and rubble, collapsing on the families trapped beneath. I wished a thousand times over that I could be there standing with them, sharing their pain, their fear, their resilience. But I am instead far away, swallowed by silence and distance. We who are scattered carry the crushing weight of survivors’ guilt, haunted by helplessness as we watch the devastation unfold on screens.

Distance does not protect us from this agony. We bleed alongside them with every headline, every photograph, every unanswered call, our hearts breaking in parallel with the land we call home.

When my family was forced to leave our home, I inevitably recalled the stories my grandmother once told me, stories of the *Nakba*, of loss, of promises never kept. Rafah had turned into a war zone, and our neighborhood, once full of life and laughter, was suddenly silent and abandoned. They moved toward so-called “safe zones” that offered no real safety, only another layer of fear and blood.

The day my family finally decided to leave, my mother wept.

“*Yamma*, what should I take and what should I leave behind?” she cried.

“This is our beloved home. We built it stone by stone. These walls have seen forty years of our joy, our sorrow, our lives.”

She stared at her small bag, aching to fit a lifetime inside it.

“I wish I could carry the whole house on my back,” she said.

“But I can’t. I’m only taking the official documents, so if we’re killed, someone can identify us. My heart breaks for everything I’m leaving behind, your childhood photos, your sister Shiraz’s—she passed away at a young age—clothes, your father’s books.”

Outside, the neighborhood was burning.

“*Yamma*,” she said softly, “I fear I’ll never see it again. I didn’t even get to say goodbye to the trees, the rooms, the scent of home. I wish I had time to smell it all one last time.”

Her words hung heavy in the air, a quiet mourning for everything left behind: love, memories, and the life she once knew, slipping away like the fading light of a setting sun.

My parents were among the last to leave the neighborhood in Tel Al-Sultan, western Rafah. Their breathing was heavy, their silence louder than any words. As my parents stepped through the shattered streets, past what used to be homes, parks, and memories, they weren’t just leaving a neighborhood. They were being pushed, once again, into uncertainty. They left with grief in their chests and memories clinging to their backs.

But even as they moved toward the unknown, they carried something else: defiance. Because leaving did not mean forgetting. And walking away did not mean surrender. Our people are not erased by displacement. We remember. We mourn. And we resist.

Somehow my mother knew that this time it was different. She knew she might never see our four-story home again, never sit beneath the palm tree in the garden, her quiet refuge during Gaza’s frequent power cuts.

When I asked my father how he felt, he was silent for a moment. Then he sighed and said:

“Yaba, life is no longer guaranteed. Keep us in your prayers.”

And so they left. They had nothing but each other.

From a home built stone by stone, walls that held their laughter, their tears, their dreams, to a tent pitched on cold ground. From rooms once alive with warmth and joy, echoing with the sounds of family and life, to the heavy silence of displacement that swallowed their voices, from a

neighborhood once alive with love, familiarity, and the scent of jasmine to a barren coastline stripped of comfort, they carried only what war could not steal: the weight of memory, the depth of love, the dignity etched into their every step, and the unyielding determination to endure. What they left behind was more than walls; it was a lifetime. What they carried forward was more than survival, it was resistance, rooted in everything they refused to forget.

They began their new life under the open sky, stripped of all certainty. It wasn't just displacement, it was devastation. A brutal uprooting of body and memory.

Displacement is not new to Palestinians. During the *Nakba* of 1948, more than 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their homes. The cycles of forced exile continued in 1967, and again in each war and military operation. In 2023, over 1.7 million Gazans, about 75% of the population, were displaced within weeks due to Israel's bombardment and evacuation orders. Rafah, the city to which my family fled, was once considered a "safe zone," but quickly became overcrowded and dangerous. UN officials described it as "a pressure cooker of despair."

My father would say: "We live day by day. We sleep not knowing if we'll wake up again. Any stray missile can wipe us out, like it did to so many others. If it happens to us, don't cry, Yaba. Death would be easier than watching all this."

He was not being dramatic. By early November 2023, entire families were being wiped out, recorded in Gaza's Civil Registry as "erased," with nothing left to bury. My father had seen too much. He couldn't bear seeing children orphaned, people starving, homes obliterated while the world watched and did nothing. Still, he continued to do what he could: organizing food, helping the displaced, turning public parks into makeshift shelters, because survival had to be communal.

And then came the call that shattered me: our house was bombed. I cried until my lungs hurt. It wasn't just a building, it was memory itself. My mother's hands had painted those walls, my father's books filled its shelves.

And now, nothing. Except one wall, still standing, stubborn against the destruction. On it were words we once painted in Arabic:

سنبقى —"We shall remain."

That phrase has echoed throughout Palestinian history, from the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan to the alleys of Gaza. It's a refusal. A vow. We will remain, even if our homes fall, even if our trees are cut, even if only ashes remain.

When the temporary ceasefire was announced on January 19, 2025, many tried to return home. My mother wanted to go too, even knowing the house was gone. She said:

"Maybe I'll find a photo, a book, a piece of our life to hold onto."

But Israeli snipers were firing at returnees. Human rights organizations documented multiple cases of people being shot while trying to return home during the truce. I begged her to wait. When it was safer, my sister's teenage son made the journey with neighbors, about an hour's walk. What he found was beyond description: gray rubble, skeletal buildings, silence where life once bloomed. Still, he managed to find a few of my father's books, some childhood photos, and, miraculously, a love poem my father had written for my mother decades ago when he was a student in the U.S.

He carried them back, like sacred relics. In a place where even memory is under attack, these fragments were everything.

A Love Poem

One of our neighbors filmed a 16-minute video of what remains of the neighborhood. His voice broke as he walked through the ruins, naming each destroyed house and the family it once held. It was not just debris; it was a mass grave of memory.

This is what war does: it doesn't just kill bodies; it tries to kill meaning. But we resist even that. My father reminded me gently: "*Habibti*, some people lost their entire families. Don't cry for the house. Cry for the living. And never stop praying for us."

We are a people who have learned to grieve while standing. Who rebuild from ash. Who carry the past in bags, poems, and photographs. And no matter how many times we are displaced, we remain.

Indeed, our home is no longer standing, it was reduced to rubble, just another pile of dust in the endless destruction of Gaza. But the destruction didn't begin this year. The Israelis had been proving to us, for decades, that they are brutal and heartless. They didn't just demolish our home, they desecrated our memories, our safety, and the lives we had built within those walls. I wish I could erase the memories that continue to haunt me.

I was only 14 years old when I first came face-to-face with Israeli violence. It was May 2004, during the invasion of Rafah, one of the fiercest Israeli military operations in Gaza since the second Intifada began in 2000. Our home stood tall above the neighborhood, which made it a strategic target. I remember thinking the tanks would stop at the park nearby, as they had done before. But that night was different.

The ground began to shake beneath us. The sound of tanks grew louder, closer, until it was inside our ears and our chests. My entire family, 24 of us, gathered on the first floor, hoping it would be safer than the upper levels. We clung to each other, paralyzed with fear. The children screamed. My grandmother, a survivor of the Nakba, tried to calm us with her steady voice and her strength.

Then it happened.

A tank rammed through the outer wall of our home.

They were coming for us.

I still remember the moment my mother whispered, "Come, *yamma*, hug me tight." We wrapped our small bodies around her, as if our embrace could protect her from what was coming. Israeli soldiers stormed the building, faces cold, weapons drawn, shouting in a language I didn't understand but whose meaning was unmistakably clear: submit, obey, be silent.

The soldiers separated the men from the women. Then they ordered all the males, including my young cousins, to remove their shirts. Then they

crammed all 24 of us, men, women, elderly, and children, into a bathroom no bigger than 2x2 meters. We were packed together, barely able to move, suffocating in fear.

We weren't given food or water. The younger children cried from hunger and terror, and only after my mother and grandmother pleaded relentlessly did they toss us some moldy, fungus-covered bread.

My grandmother, may she be remembered in strength, was the only one who did not show fear. She stood up to them when no one else could. When they moved us from the bathroom to a different room upstairs, they shoved a rifle into her back. But she didn't flinch. Her courage was her resistance.

In those three days, which felt endless, I witnessed horrors. I saw soldiers laugh as they desecrated our home. I heard gunshots outside and knew later that they had executed two of our neighbors in cold blood. They bulldozed the park where we once played, destroying beauty simply because they could. And before they finally left, they looted my mother's jewelry, her savings, our phones.

No child should ever have to live through this. No family should watch their home turned into a battlefield. But this is the reality of growing up in Gaza: a life shaped by siege, shattered by war, and scarred by loss. It is a reality carved not just into our hearts, but into our collective history and the uncertain future we inherit.

These are the wounds we carry. And we do not carry them in silence. We carry them in remembrance, in every story we tell, in every memory we refuse to let die. Because to remember is to resist.

In addition to the tragedy my family endured during the ongoing genocide in Gaza, my heart was broken by another grief, which is still an open wound.

My visit to Gaza in January 2023 turned out to be a farewell. A farewell to the streets I once walked freely, to the neighborhood that held my childhood, to the home I loved, and the memories I thought would always be there waiting for me. I did not know then that it would be the last time I would see my city as I knew it. After the war, even if I return, nothing will

be the same, just rubble scattered across silence. The joy has been replaced by sadness, and deep, unhealing grief.

When I return, there will be no Salma and her family waiting at the Rafah border to greet me, to welcome me into their home like they always did, letting me stay until I surprised my own family. Salma, my best friend, my soulmate, the one who knew me better than anyone else, was always the first embrace I received in Gaza. Every time I visited, my mother would tease, "Did you come for Salma or for us?" Because I spent most of my time with her. She was every happiness in my life, the light in every dark corner.

We had planned to see each other in October 2023. My ticket was ready to surprise her. She went ahead of me to spend time with her family before I arrived. We were counting the days until we would reunite. But war came first.

Salma left Gaza in 2021, after marrying and moving to Jordan. This was her first visit back home, and also a first visit for Ali, her newborn son, who was only a few months old. Everyone loved him.

When the war began, she messaged me: "This war is different."

We then leaned on each other with voice notes and prayers. I could not sleep, worried for my family. She couldn't sleep either, fearful for her baby, her parents, her siblings. The Israeli airstrikes were relentless, targeting civilians, homes, and entire neighborhoods. I remember telling her, "Salma, my heart hurts, I feel something terrible is coming." She replied, "My heart is heavy too." We read Qur'an together to calm us.

On October 23, 2023, she was scared, exhausted. I tried to calm her by bringing up old memories. She smiled through her fear and said, "Do you remember when you used to come to my house early in the morning to drink coffee, and then we'd get *manakish* from the bakery and walk to the sea? Do you remember when I dropped my phone in the water while we were taking pictures, and you kept searching for it, and then a wave came and knocked us both down?" We laughed through our fear. That laughter was our final resistance.

That night, she said she would speak with her husband in Jordan. He was terrified for her and their newborn son, Ali. She wanted to calm him, to carry the burden of fear so he wouldn't have to. I let her go with a soft goodnight, never imagining it would be the last time I'd ever hear her voice.

The next morning, I woke to find missed calls, messages, notifications flooding in. I had been sleeping, and I did not answer right away. Then my sister Ishraq, who lives in Turkiye, finally got through. Her voice was shaking and she was crying, as she said: "Call Salma. Call her now."

I sat up, heart pounding. "What happened? We just spoke last night."

She struggled to say it. Her voice cracked: "They bombed her house."

My hands froze. My heart collapsed. I called Salma. No answer. I called her mother. No answer. Her siblings. Silence. One after another, no one picked up. I started dialing everyone, neighbors, friends, anyone who might know something. My voice trembled with each call: "Please, please, do you know anything?"

Finally, a friend picked up. I heard her crying. My voice broke. "Why are you crying? Is Salma okay? Is her baby okay?"

There was a long pause, a silence that thundered louder than bombs. Then she whispered: "Pray for them. The Israeli army targeted their home. They're pulling their bodies from the rubble."

I could not breathe.

"No, no. Please no. Ya Allah, return her to me. Return her to me!" I screamed until my throat was raw.

I collapsed. I fainted again and again. My body gave up, but my heart kept fighting the truth. I was taken to the hospital. But even there, even on a bed with oxygen and needles in my arms, I refused to believe it. I kept calling. I kept hoping. My soul refused to accept what my ears had heard.

But it was true.

My best friend. My soulmate. My joy. My sister in every sense but blood, gone. Slaughtered in her home while holding her baby. Her newborn son, Ali, whose first trip to Gaza was also his last. Her parents, her two sisters, her two brothers, and several displaced relatives who had sought

refuge with them, twenty martyrs in one home. Twenty hearts silenced. Gaza became her grave.

I still whisper her name. Sometimes out loud, when the silence feels too heavy to bear. Sometimes quietly, inside my chest, where her voice once lived, where her laughter still echoes like a fading song.

And I wait. I wait in the hollow spaces of the day, in the stillness of night, hoping for a reply I know will never come.

But still, I believe she hears me somehow. I hope she knows I haven't let go of her. That I carry her in every breath, in every tear, in every word I write. I speak her name into the world not out of grief alone, but out of duty, because she was not just a friend nor a memory. She is a story, a soul, a life that gave me happiness and joy.

Because she was not just a number.

This is not just my loss, it is the story of every Palestinian who has been robbed of a future, who has tasted exile and carried the unbearable weight of memory. We are survivors, yes, but we are also witnesses. And as long as we speak, remember, and write, they cannot erase us.

My heart has not known peace. I sank into a deep depression, tormented by the reality that all I could offer my family was money and prayers. I felt useless, paralyzed by distance, aching to do more while they endured the unthinkable. And as if that pain weren't enough, the loss of Salma shattered me. Her absence left an open wound I carry every single day.

The temporary truce in January 2025 brought a fragile calm, a moment to breathe. For a brief time, I was not afraid of waking up to news that my family had been bombed. I was not consumed by the thought that Salma's grave might be targeted next, as Israel has done with so many cemeteries in Gaza, desecrating the dead after destroying the living. They kill our people twice: once in life, and once in death. I found myself praying not just for the living, but for the graves to be spared, for memory itself to survive their cruelty.

But that sense of relief did not last. On March 17, Israel broke the ceasefire. In a single day, they killed more than 300 Palestinians. It was a

massacre. The violence was sudden, merciless, like the war had never ended. My phone trembled in my hand as I tried again and again to reach my mother. When she finally answered, her voice was faint, drained of strength. She had no words left to describe the terror.

“They didn’t even give us time to rest,” she said.

They had barely begun to recover. People were still living in tents, hungry, freezing, without electricity or clean water. The truce had offered a thin thread of hope, but it was ripped away in an instant. My mother spoke of the screams, the chaos, the sound of bombs falling again, like a nightmare returning just as you begin to wake up. And yet, somehow, they survived.

That day shattered me. It was during the holy month of Ramadan, a time of prayer, fasting, and reflection. But instead of peace, Palestinians were massacred. When the ceasefire broke, it reopened all my wounds. I cried for my best friend Salma, for our destroyed home, for my relatives and neighbors buried beneath the rubble. In the middle of my sorrow, my phone rang.

It was May 17, 2025, around 9:20 p.m. My husband, Badar Khan Suri, was calling. I could hear fear in his voice. He didn’t speak clearly, just, “Come fast, they’re arresting me.” I asked what was going on, but he repeated, “Come fast.”

I rushed to the door. Outside, I saw three masked federal agents going through his bag. They handcuffed him in front of me and dragged him into a car. “Who are you? Why are you taking him?” I demanded. One of them responded coldly: “We’re from Homeland Security. The government revoked his visa.” That was it. No explanation. No answers.

They tore him away from me and our three young children without telling us why. In the days that followed, they transferred him between five different detention facilities across three states. He was fasting, yet they refused to give him food or even water. He ended up over 1,500 miles away, sleeping on the floor, barely fed, alone.

He had gone from being a respected Georgetown University professor to suddenly being labeled a "national security threat to U.S. foreign policy." I could not believe it. Badar had spent his entire life studying and teaching peace, social justice, and human rights. He told me, "I believe in justice in this country. I did nothing wrong. All I did was speak about the genocide in Gaza. The First Amendment protects freedom of speech. Why am I being punished for telling the truth?"

Even through his suffering, he didn't break. He told me, "If I'm being punished for speaking about Gaza, then I wear that suffering as a badge of honor."

We kept faith that justice would prevail. And *Alhamdulillah*, it did. The government had no evidence, just the baseless claims of online doxxing groups. A federal judge saw through it and ordered his release on bail. It was a victory, not just for us, but for every voice silenced by fear.

When Badar returned from Texas to Washington, D.C., the airport was packed. Hundreds of supporters stood with us, waving Palestinian flags, wearing keffiyehs, chanting for justice. When he walked out and saw the crowd, he smiled and said, "If speaking for Palestine is a crime, then I carry that guilt with pride."

This is just one piece of the truth: even outside Gaza, we are not safe. We are not comfortable. We carry our pain with us, into classrooms, into courtrooms, into exile. The Israeli occupation does not end at Gaza's borders. It reaches into our lives, our dignity, our families.

And yet, we continue. We speak. We resist. Because enforced silence, too, is a form of violence. And we will not be silent.

The war is not only waged through bombs and bullets. It is waged through detentions, surveillance, silencing, deportations, and targeted fear. They try to break our spirits by isolating us, by making examples of those who dare to speak. But we refuse to disappear.

We are still here. And we will not stop telling the truth.

When they destroy our homes, we rebuild with memory.

When they take our loved ones, we carry their names forward.

When they try to silence us, we speak louder.

This pain has shaped us, yes. But it has not defeated us. Our scars are not signs of weakness, they are proof that we have endured what was meant to erase us. And still, we rise.

They have tried to break our spirit and silence our voices, but we are still standing, unbroken. We will not be silent. Not in Gaza, not in exile, not anywhere.

Because Palestine lives in us and we live for its liberation.

Asia al-Masouabi

Strength Forged in Unending Loss

Asia al-Masouabi's story is one of unrelenting loss amid the genocide in Gaza, yet it is defined by her extraordinary persistence. The walls began closing in with the deaths of her husband and second eldest son, followed by the loss of her infant child. After the essay was written, her remaining son, Mohammed, was killed, leaving her with one teenage daughter and making her one of her clan's few survivors. Despite the her sheer physical and emotional exhaustion, Asia continued to teach in a small tent, clinging fiercely to her faith. Her narrative is a testament to the indomitable spirit of a Gaza woman, a strength that proves more powerful than all-consuming grief.

If Only I Had Wings

I NEVER EXPECTED to be blessed with a child after 14 years from giving birth to my last. It was not planned, but it was a sudden blessing from God, a gift that could not be refused. It was initially an immense shock, but then I accepted the news with contentment, before settling on reluctant excitement.

After two months, I became increasingly attached to the fetus. The more I felt her developing inside me, the more my love for her intensified. After her father's martyrdom in the early days of the war, I anticipated her arrival with ever greater longing, for she was the last trace my husband left me in this life. I couldn't let go. I couldn't let him die again. My husband was

killed trying to defend the Shati refugee camp. My second eldest son was killed trying to avenge his father. I clung to the child growing inside of me. I felt that it was heaven's way of restoring some of what I had already lost.

On our journey, we constantly encountered and experienced horror. In the early months of the war, I left Gaza for the south, reaching Khan Younis before moving further south to Rafah. It was not easy leaving my son Abdul Rahman, my parents, and my martyred husband behind. They were all killed in the war. But Alaa's presence within me gave me the motivation to continue. We walked long distances to be able to escape, only to reach a region that seemed safe, before having to escape, over and over again.

After my husband and son's martyrdom, I felt that my mission in life was to save the others. But I did not want to leave the Shati camp. There was a faint hope that they were still alive, that they would walk into the house, together, greet and hug me as if the whole thing was a cruel joke, a mere misunderstanding. But as explosions took away whole neighborhoods and their inhabitants, I had to accept my fate that my son would never kiss my forehead again, and that my husband would never greet me again with that beautiful smile of his; that my whole family in Shati would be nothing but a memory.

I left the city carrying a pain in my heart; I had lost my support.

I continued, clinging to my remaining family members and to the fetus I held, but who was in fact holding me together. I gave birth to my baby in Rafah, at the Emirati Hospital, and was in constant contact with my mother, who passed away shortly after my delivery. She was my support and pillar after the death of my life partner.

But another shock came with Alaa's birth. For the first time, I delivered my baby via cesarean section, under difficult circumstances as the war continued to rage on.

Despite the impossible circumstance, a genocide and an ensuing famine, I took great care in the pregnancy. I felt that the baby would be okay, but the shocks never stopped. My baby was born with a blue face and body. She needed immediate oxygen to save her life, before doctors discovered

her heart was open and required valve replacement. They told me: “Her condition is very critical; you cannot hold her in your arms, and you cannot take her home.”

I desperately needed her presence to ease my loneliness. A whole week passed before a doctor called me and told me to come back to the hospital and pick her up, along with instructions on daily heart treatment. But how could I save Alaa when the hospitals are bombed daily, when the roads are cut off, and when death could swoop down at any moment to take the life of an innocent person, a whole family, an entire community?

But losing Alaa was not an option. I was so determined to grant her the life that had been denied to her father and I. I traveled with her between the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir Al-Balah and the European Hospital at the far end of Khan Younis. I was one of the lucky few when I secured a referral for overseas treatment when she was only two months old, but with the occupation’s invasion of Rafah and the blowing up of the only crossing between Gaza and Egypt, my hopes were shattered. I had to start anew after I was informed that all referrals were canceled. The journey of pain and tears began all over again.

Alaa only obtained a “Category A” after turning six months of age. However, even there, we could not leave as the crossings were closed and the occupation only allowed three or four emergency cases to leave every day. Tens of thousands of injured were dying slowly in hospitals, on the streets, or inside their tents. I did not, and could not, give up. I continued taking her to the hospital for nine and a half months until the director of Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis intervened to expedite her exit through Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital to save her life. Gaza medical staff are extraordinary people. Somehow, they never lose their humanity, no matter what happens.

My bond with Alaa strengthened every day. Her laughter reawakened a hope within me, a new reassurance that maybe things would be okay. I rejoiced at the thought that she would live and be with me forever. Doctors confirmed she needed surgery before her first birthday, putting me in a race against time. As I sought help from everyone I could find, people kept

telling me “Inshallah, God willing, your daughter will live.” I told them I knew she would, as God had ordained this miracle would survive with a clear purpose in mind.

After Alaa’s birth, I escaped the genocide, taking her and my other children to the Yabna School in Khirbet Al-Adas in Rafah, where we lived. We were forced there by the massacres that seemed to follow us everywhere. But I also felt that being closer to the Egyptian border was a step closer to safety. I daydreamed of having wings and flying with my surviving children, to save Alaa, to save them.

It was not easy living there with a child in a critical condition, among other bereaved families, carrying indescribable wounds and burdens. Alaa was very fragile, just like a butterfly, and she was affected by any smoke, perfume, or odor of any kind. She could not be close to an open fire, something almost impossible when all the displaced families sat around the fire, seeking warmth, light, or somewhere to cook. Yet, they were all so kind and did everything they could to accommodate me and my baby.

I moved between hospitals and clinics: the European Hospital, the Catholic Clinic, Abu Yousef al-Najjar Clinic, the Emirati Hospital, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, and even private clinics, searching for suitable care for her. I spared no effort. I often had no food, nor did my other children, as at times, it was inaccessible or unaffordable. I was fixated on saving Alaa, even if I died trying. Her presence in my life was a balm that greatly alleviated the pain of loss. I did not tire or complain despite my almost daily visits to hospitals. I constantly prayed for her condition to improve and get better. My mornings began with her, and my evenings ended with her. With every bombing or invasion alert, I searched for a safe place near the street, so I could quickly carry her to safety if there was an emergency. On multiple occasions, I called an ambulance, walked long distances, and rode on top of donkey carts, just to get her to the hospital.

One day, Alaa suffocated due to the intense heat inside the tent. I took her outside, running like a madwoman in search of shade and air. People saw her desperate condition and rushed to help me, hooking a battery to a

small fan to lower her body temperature. She began breathing with some ease. Life in a tent with a child with a heart condition is not easy, as she needs good heating at night and air and oxygen during the day, which cannot be provided inside tents that turn into ovens at noon.

It was a great effort to breastfeed Alaa, so I gave her 100 ml of formula. When she completed six months, I added nutritional supplements. Her weight increased, and she improved, before her condition worsened again. I could not even acknowledge the possibility that I might lose her. Before her birth, I had lost so many people, so many loved ones: my husband, my son, my parents, my sister Asmaa, my brother Omar. They were all gone. Losing Alaa would bring all the pain and loss that I had been trying to escape for months. I couldn't afford reliving these agonies. Alaa's death would reopen all the pages of my suffering all at once.

As the genocide worsened and movement became nearly impossible, I decided to move to Zawaida in the central region to facilitate access to the only operating hospital. Doctors sympathized, but could not expedite referrals due to the occupation's pressure and the prioritization of cancer patients.

Before moving, I arranged the family's needs. While my children had grown accustomed to relying on themselves, I was always in contact with them via phone, giving them instructions. My heart and body were with Alaa, and my mind with her siblings.

Only my daughter Malak was with me.. Alaa was on the oxygen machine, and at times she appeared to be in good condition. We took turns to monitor her condition. But then, the machine stopped, and there was nothing I could do to get it to start again. My first impulse was simply to look away, as if not knowing would somehow prolong her life. A woman from a neighboring tent heard my cries, rushed in, grabbed Alaa, and then rushed to seek help. We found a doctor, who told me Alaa was dead.

But her body was warm, I insisted. "Please check again," I screamed. But he had nothing else to tell me. I hugged her and cried. At the clinic, the medics asked me to put her in a mortuary, which was broken, alongside two

bodies lying on the floor. They asked me to put my baby on the floor, but I refused. I could not leave her alone, not like that. I held her in my arms, so close to my heart, all night, reading Quran chapters to her until morning broke. Then I took her to the washing facility, to sanctify her as Gaza's latest martyr.

When Ehab proposed to me, my father had told me that he was a member of the resistance. I agreed to marry him because I believed in his noble cause. While I fully knew the risks, this did not make it any easier to comprehend his sudden loss. He loved life, accompanying me everywhere —on outings, to restaurants, to the beach. Friday was our holiday, when he helped me with breakfast and prepared his lessons for Friday sermons at the local mosque while I prepared lunch.

Ehab supported and helped me in every way, assisted me in memorizing the whole Quran, patiently explaining what was difficult for me to understand. We would follow our sons' and daughters' lessons together and encourage them to do likewise. Our spirituality made our family stronger and was our shield in the face of this unforgiving existence. Then, Malak became our pride and joy. When my daughter recited the holy book, it was as if angels were singing. Her voice, just like her, was pure. After she completed memorizing the entire book of God, I encouraged her to participate in the "Most Beautiful Voice" competition organized by Dar Al-Quran Al-Kareem Wal Sunnah. I told her: "Perhaps someone will be affected by a verse you recite, and it will change the course of his or her life."

She agreed to start reciting on the school radio, in what became daily training for her voice and self-confidence. Over time, as she progressed and developed, I supported her by listening to the voices of other great reciters, and she trained continuously, until the awaited day came. She participated in the competition and won first place in West Gaza and second in the entire Strip.

All of Malak's siblings also memorized the Quran. I closely followed them at first as they worked hard, before they continued their path of

memorization and contemplation on their own. Looking at them now, I still see a bright future for them amidst the darkness that has enveloped us. Whenever I see each one in their own corner reading, I feel as if the war has stopped, as if the spirits of the lost are hovering around us, as if hope has been reborn.

For now, I continue to face life's hardships alone, managing the children's affairs and taking responsibility for the home, whether a tent or a room in a relative's home that remained standing.

I also continue to teach Arabic and Quranic lessons. I will reorganize my life, rebuild my home, and, despite the immense sorrow in my heart, stand on my feet once more. The balance of my family must be restored. My children are like seeds Ehab and I had planted in the heart of adversity, who, by their very existence, sprout new hope, connecting me ever more strongly to life.

For months I wondered why I had Alaa, only to lose her, compounding my pain even more. But now, I think of her as an angel who came down to this earth to comfort me and keep me stronger when I was falling apart. In the darkest of nights, when my children and I are praying in the tent, lest death come raining down from the sky, I think of Alaa's smile and innocent giggle, and then I smile myself. "I will see you soon in heaven, my little baby. But for now, I must stay strong because there is a shattered life that I must rebuild."

Bashaer Abu Ma'amar

A Bride's Unyielding Hope

On October 7, 2023 Bashaer Abu Ma'amar was a bride preparing for her wedding; soon, she became a witness to immense family loss and repeated displacement. Her wedding to Amir was reduced to a simple ceremony in a crowded Rafah tent, only for the couple to face immediate upheaval again. Now pregnant, she and Amir returned to a destroyed northern Gaza where she faced the war of starvation. Bashaer carried a seed of hope, naming her unborn son Muath, meaning "the protected by God." She is determined that his birth will mark a new, "green chapter" for her city amidst the rubble.

"The Protected by God"

THAT SATURDAY marked the first day of my holiday as a bride, a brief reprieve from the ever-challenging life in Gaza. On October 7, I did not wake up as usual to prepare for another workday. In Ma'an, a small town east of Khan Younis, I moved between rooms, cautiously tasting joy. It was the day of "hanging the trousseau"—a cherished family ritual every girl anticipated. This was when the bride, accompanied by her female relatives, would go to her new apartment to arrange wedding attire and household items in the closets, scattering stories and laughter, in a small celebration of a new beginning.

I had spent the months of my engagement carefully selecting every item: from the colors of the nightgowns to the intricate details of

embroidered bags, dresses, and even shoes. The night before, we wrote loved ones' names on wedding invitations for distribution, gathered our small gifts into pink bags, wrapped them in white chiffon, and carefully adorned their handles with artificial flowers. We sat in the living room, gathered around the completed bags.

It was a warm, intimate gathering of my sisters, my brothers' wives, and some relatives. Whispering laughter filled the room as I received advice in the Gazan dialect: "Be careful when you enter the hall; you must hold your head high and smile, that's the most important thing." And "Don't you dare cry on your wedding day, or your makeup will be ruined."

Then Palestinian melodies flowed through the air, making our hearts flutter:

"From above the eye's lash, the fringe sways.
Pray for the Prophet, the bride is a gazelle."

Amidst our whispers and laughter, we waited the remaining time until our departure to my apartment on Thalatheeni Street, in Gaza City, where we had arranged for the driver to pick us up after noon. Our entire family prepared for that short journey toward the start of our new life. There, in that apartment, we would celebrate with my fiancé Amir's family, observing the trousseau-hanging ceremony.

But Palestinian joy—as history has taught us—is fragile.

On October 7, the sun did not rise alone; it was accompanied by the sound of rockets launching toward our occupied lands. We did not know that something monumental was unfolding, something that would alter the map of my coming days, indeed, the map of all Gaza. That moment was a turning point: between being a bride awaiting her wedding in five days or becoming a witness to a new chapter of the Palestinian exodus, this one called "the war of annihilation." At a time when Palestinians chose to open a window to freedom from the heart of darkness, the response came fiery, violent, boundless, merciless, and without red lines.

Since 1948, when Israel forcibly occupied our land and violently displaced our grandparents, Palestinians have been destined to live in a continuous *Nakba*—in UNRWA schools, in tin camps, with house keys hung like necklaces over grandmothers' chests—history reweaved with threads of pain. That was the first exodus and the cornerstone of this ongoing suffering, but our generation witnessed it in its cruelest forms, with a special, more brutal and bloodier chapter of displacement written for us.

Endless Farewell

The first month of the war passed, and the Israeli killing machine struck deep into everything we owned: our homes, our neighborhoods, our hospitals, our mosques, our schools. But the deepest blow tore at our hearts.

This was not the first time we Gazans experienced terror, but it was the first time we witnessed such savagery. We heard blow after blow, saw homes collapse one after another, and lived through loss after loss.

My uncle Zakaria's martyrdom, on the third day of the war, was our first loss, our first heart tremor, our first deep wound, the first slap that shattered our souls. Despite his many political engagements, my uncle had arranged his time to attend my wedding.

"How is Amir with you? Are you happy together?"

"Alhamdulillah, God protect us," I replied shyly.

That was the last time I saw him, days before the war erupted. He asked about when the groom's family would come to take me to the wedding—a family ritual in our customs that the entire "clan" must attend. His departure severed the first thread of hope that life would return to normal. Day after day, something in my heart gradually collapsed. Fear escalated, pain deepened, and despair swept over me.

My brother Zakaria, named after my uncle, always tried to comfort me in his own way. He had always dreamed of praying in Al-Aqsa. He told me one evening: "Don't be sad, my sister . . . Tomorrow we'll have the most beautiful wedding in Al-Aqsa. Square, and the joy will be double."

I smiled . . . and prayed to God to unite us on such a day.

Israel did not just cut off roads between northern and southern Gaza; it severed all threads of safety between Amir and me.

For the first time in our lives, we experienced a complete communication and internet blackout. Days passed without any news of Amir, leaving me unable to reassure him or be reassured about him, while strikes intensified on the northern part of the Strip, where he lived with his family.

Between Al-Shati camp in the north and Ma'an east of Khan Younis in the south, the distance was deadly . . . and the cruelest part was its silence. I had no way of knowing the news except through the radio. I searched its waves for any news about the north, for any sign of life.

One night, under the pressure of artillery shelling, we were forced to displace again. We headed west to my aunt's house.

No connection, no electricity, no reassurance. Late at night, the voice of Gaza journalist Wael al-Dahdouh woke me through the radio:

"Entire buildings are being flattened before our eyes in Al-Shati camp. It seems there are dozens of martyrs on the roads . . . and ambulances cannot reach them." My blood froze.

Is he alive? Is his house one of those buildings? Did he leave before the ground beneath him was flattened? I turned on the radio every hour, despite my mother's grumbling, who feared the battery would run out. "Trust in God, my daughter . . . pray for him. Crying won't bring back the news," she said, but I could not.

On the fourth day, the call I had been waiting for came.

"Amir is calling . . ." I pressed the answer button before it finished ringing.

– "My love, are you okay? How are you?!"

– *"Alhamdulillah*, we're fine. . . . We're leaving Al-Shifa Hospital for the south. Is there a place we can go?"

I did not know where his family could go, as my family and I were ourselves displaced. I quickly said:

“Yes, of course. There are many places . . . just come.” I was not thinking of anything then, except to get him to safety . . . and to our reunion.

At Bani Suheila roundabout, the transition point between north and south, was the meeting. The faces were not as I had known them—pale, tired, some injured, all bearing the marks of hunger and disappointment. I saw city dwellers standing by the road, distributing water bottles to the displaced, but my eyes fixed on a single face: Amir’s.

He finally arrived. His hair was not styled as I was used to, nor did the scent of his cologne fill the air as it had on every visit. He was silent, burdened, returning from a north ablaze with war. I shook his hand in silence, as if we were apologizing to each other for this broken encounter. Our steps led us to a school my sister suggested as a temporary shelter. That place was not a dream, nor even the beginning of a life, but it was enough for us to start anew, under the roof of fear, and in the embrace of a stubborn love that survived fire and absence.

But the meeting did not last long either.

It was as if life granted us a fleeting respite from pain, a brief moment of joy, before closing the doors again. Every time I walked with Amir through Khan Younis’s alleys, something inside me whispered: “Cherish these moments, they may not be repeated.” And now the whisper turned into a screaming echo. News began to pour in: the Israeli army was preparing to launch a military operation in Khan Younis. Doubt turned into certainty, and fear began to blaze into hearts like wildfire. We walked one evening through the streets, listening to people’s murmurs:

– “They want to displace us to Rafah, just like they displaced the north.”

– “I wish I had died before hearing this news.”

The city was teeming with displaced people. Tents on sidewalks, exhausted faces, people moving aimlessly. Children played near the rubble, and women baked bread with trembling fingers. The streets groaned under the weight, the crowds, the broken stories. Amidst all that, I began to scrutinize the city’s features, as if seeing it for the first and last time. I

looked at the walls of houses, at the doors of shops, at the minarets, at the branches that withstood the war. Khan Younis, which I love, seemed to wave to me, bidding a silent, painful farewell.

Then came the artillery shelling. Amir's family did not wait to repeat the northern tragedy. They made the decision quickly and displaced to Rafah before roads closed and the siege tightened. On the day of farewell, I went to him at his displacement site. I did not say much. I hugged him for a long time, as if the embrace was a cure for what could not be cured. I felt his body tremble, and his eyes told more than a thousand words. He whispered to me:

– "I entrust you to God. . . . Try to convince my uncle to follow us quickly; they won't have mercy on us."

I nodded, drowning in my tears. I did not want to leave him, but war always snatches us from the arms of those we love.

A Wedding in a Tent

Rafah, a city overwhelmed by its residents and those who flocked to it from all directions, was no longer the same; its streets, barely wide enough for a vehicle, now embraced thousands of displaced people. On sidewalks, in squares, between demolished buildings, and on the seashore, tents were erected as temporary signs of surrender to the catastrophe. Every corner in Rafah became a temporary home for a displaced family, and every house was packed with frightened souls and exhausted bodies.

Within this overcrowding, our new version of love was born. We no longer met in quiet homes or cafes, but on roads groaning under the feet of the displaced. The city, with all its congestion and noise, became a witness to our silent wanderings, Amir and I, drawing on its walls the features of a relationship besieged by war but refusing to die. We memorized Rafah's streets by heart; every corner became ours, every stone seemed to know the sound of our footsteps.

My family and I were displaced to my sister Bisan's narrow and warm apartment, which miraculously expanded to accommodate my family, my

brother Zakaria's family, his wife Duaa, and their two children, Ali and Hayat. Amir, meanwhile, was in the far west of the city with his family, displaced in an apartment bustling with three other families. To reach me, he had to travel more than three hours through streets boiling with people and fear. Yet, he came.

We had no place to receive him, so we roamed the streets, in the fields, sometimes on the sidewalks. We were not just looking for moments of love; we were trying to light something around us, to rearrange ourselves anew. We distributed milk to children, organized simple activities to entertain them, sometimes laughed in the faces of their mothers, our tears on the verge of falling. We participated in many charitable initiatives that revived things within us that the war had stolen.

Fear was always present. The cruelest thing we feared was separation, that a sudden airstrike would not give us a chance to say goodbye. We lived that when my aunt Umm Mohammed's displaced home was bombed without warning. She ascended with 33 members of our family in silence.

My father concealed his fear with strictness, only allowing me to go out when necessary. But necessities conspired in favor of my heart. We would go out to work together, I as a news translator and writer, and Amir as a graphic designer. We would sit on sidewalks near communication points, trying to breathe life back into our old work, to breathe a little outside the war. Between one project and another, we'd discuss: How would we reunite? How would we escape fear? How would we break the cycle of war to start our lives together?

We thought of traveling, of escaping. Then we would look at the faces of our loved ones around us and reconsider.

My family and I moved to Al-Mawasi, closer to Amir, but it was not any safer. In a tent devoured by the summer sun, amidst mosquito and fly bites, we began to think about a fateful matter. Eight months had passed since the war. Nothing changed except the number of victims. Hope was eroding. But amidst the rubble, Amir still insisted on marriage.

We had only two housing options: the tent or a room in the crowded apartment he shared with two other families. We chose the room, without hesitation. Amir prepared it himself. And his family came to visit us. We agreed on the date amidst the tears of my father and mother, and Zakaria's beautiful laughter.

On the wedding day, I wore a simple white dress, without adornment nor procession. It was not the same embellished dress I had chosen, then separated from me by the Israeli barrier and tens of thousands of martyrs. I sat among my brothers and sisters, and Amir's mother and sister in our tent. The wedding hall we had chosen had been destroyed by Israeli missiles. There was no music, no loud laughter, just an exchange of worries, and a few shy laughs that resembled the bride's shyness of life in a time that gives nothing.

I bid farewell to my family, and to my tent that had sheltered me for months. The moment of separation was the hardest. I was not leaving a house, but an embrace that was worth the whole world. My brother Zakaria took on the task of preparing "the newlyweds' dinner." He was gone for long hours and returned with a small bag containing grilled meat, kebabs he bought at an exorbitant price. And as usual, he presented it to us with a dose of his gentle jokes.

Rafah, which witnessed our wedding, was suddenly hit by Israeli evacuation orders just ten days after our wedding, when the Israeli army partially withdrew from Khan Younis. Our love notwithstanding, we were again denied a chance to settle down. We were displaced again, I, the bride who had barely tasted joy, returned to Ma'an, this time with my husband, to my family's damaged home in the Ma'an area. An old room, my memories in it mixed between childhood and youth, became my new refuge after a tent and two farewells.

When Home Became a Grave

Ma'an, despite everything, inspired hope. We lived there for about a month—just one month—but it was like a short truce with life. The area initially seemed calm, beautiful; even flowers began to sprout from between

the stones and the land torn apart by Israeli bulldozers. A danger resided beneath its soil, but we insisted on staying. That was enough for us to believe that life, even if temporary, was possible.

When we returned to Rafah, Zakaria and his small family followed us. His apartment, adjacent to the family home on the ground floor, had been leveled, so we shared the abandoned house with him. The two-story building that had embraced our childhood now looked different. Before the war, our warm home had a small garden built around five palm trees, two ancient olive trees witnessing the passage of years, a lemon tree exuding the scent of summer, and beds of wild mint, basil, and a jasmine vine with flowers dangling between the fences.

We found it without windows, without doors, without trees, some of its walls open to emptiness, its fence bulldozed, with jasmine stubbornly growing between its stones. But we closed a room for Zakaria and a room for us, and told ourselves: it is enough to be together. Among the five palm trees, one had broken my father's heart when he saw it collapsed on the ground. My grandfather Ali planted it when my father was just six years old. My father Shahada told me that his father cared for it as he cared for his young ones, and I bear witness that my father spent a long life caring for the trees, especially the palm trees dear to his heart.

In Ma'an, most residents and neighbors love trees and are skilled in agriculture. Almost every home has a garden, and every garden has its share of palm cultivation. In the red date season, houses bustle with the making of local date paste from fresh dates and delicious date cake. The sight of the bulldozed trees on the ground exhausted our souls, and my father's soul even more.

We had a routine. My brother's wife Duaa and I would knead dough in the morning, and my brothers would bake. We would eat with the children with an appetite driven by hunger and enhanced by love. We tried to escape the war, to close the doors of our memory as we closed the rooms.

Our luxury was to get a bag of chips, or a biscuit, or a watermelon that we all shared. We had made a pact to satisfy our cravings as long as the

crossings were open because we might lose these simple luxuries at any time. Our rosy moments were stolen from between the whistling of planes and the roar of cannons.

But in the book of annihilation written by Israel, the first page says: “Nothing lasts long; Gazans are condemned to live in annihilation and starvation.”

Friday. It always had a distinct flavor in our Palestinian calendar, with a special dish for lunch, often meat or chicken, a small weekend celebration. On the morning of Friday, July 19, 2024, we woke to the roar of artillery instead of the smell of delicious *tagine*. Shell fragments hit our roof; children carried them in their small hands as if they were toys of fire. As soon as the shelling subsided, we unconsciously returned to our morning rituals, forgetting for a moment that we were in the heart of a merciless hell. This stubbornness was the only way that helped us cope with the harsh days.

At breakfast, I distributed bread and cheese to the children first. Hayat, the beautiful little girl, and Aloush, Zakaria’s darling, smiled as if they owned the world. I handed Zakaria his breakfast and a cup of tea, and he said, laughing: “Even though I had breakfast, I can’t say no to a cup of tea from your hand.” We laughed. We laughed a lot in those days, because crying was exhausting.

The scarcity of the market failed us. We could not find meat or chicken. But Zakaria, as usual, was decisive in his choices: “Spaghetti!” he said enthusiastically, as if we were in an Italian kitchen and not in a house without doors. We laughed again. I did not know that this laughter would be the last, and that the spilled spaghetti would be the last thing I saw of my old life.

At the very moment I was about to go to the kitchen to serve the food, just as I was closing my laptop, everything fell. An Israeli missile struck us in broad daylight. Moments before I reached the kitchen, everything exploded. I felt like the sky had fallen on my head.

I hit the ground, losing consciousness for seconds, before waking to the sound of my husband Amir screaming my name. Stones still rained down, smoke filled my lungs, and dust obscured my vision. I whispered the two testimonies of faith as I felt my leg, thinking it had been amputated. But Amir carried me amidst the fire and rubble. We tried to get out, not knowing which direction, but we got out.

I saw Duaa under the rubble, her head barely visible as neighbors rushed to the rescue. Duaa came out, severely injured, as did Hayat. Zakaria and Aloush were nowhere to be seen, and silence enveloped their place. As I waited for them, I convinced myself they were fine.

But, in just minutes, the sounds of *"Allahu Akbar"* rose from neighbors and relatives. "Zakaria is a martyr!"

I was taken in the ambulance with Amir and my uncle Tamim, the brave journalist, who cried like a child when we told him about Zakaria's martyrdom. He tried to comfort me, and I tried to hold myself together for my mother and father.

At the hospital, I realized that my chest still beat: my injury was not severe, but my soul was amputated. I heard my mother burst into the emergency room, hugging me, crying, at times mourning Zakaria and at others thanking God. Her voice tore me apart. As for my father, he was the steadfast mountain. I told him, resisting my tears: "You are the father of a martyr; hold your head high and be proud."

Then, amidst all this, a strange incident. Tamim found my name on an unknown body in the morgue. But he knew I was alive. So who else was in the house when it was destroyed? No answer was forthcoming until it was realized that this "body" was actually the lower half of Zakaria's body, which had been cut in half. The upper part of Zakaria's body embraced his little Aloush, as if protecting him even in death. The lower part, or what remained of his remains, was now gathered under a woman's prayer dress, leading attendants to mistake it for a secondary body.

I did not go to bid farewell to Aloush. I did not know he had left. I thought he had been taken for treatment. I was counting the injured on my

fingers: Duaa, Hayat, Amir, and I. Then, in a moment of realization, I screamed his name: “Where is Aloush?” My father replied with a catch in his voice: “May God have mercy on him.” I went to bid farewell to Zakaria, not knowing that he was holding his beloved child in his last moments. I was afraid to cry for him, the martyr who always spoke to us about the dignities of the soul and the safety of the people of Paradise. I whispered to him: “I am proud of you . . . and may God make it easy for you.” Then I left, gasping with tears.

The image of scattered pasta, mixed with rubble and smoke, still haunts me. The image of Duaa under the rubble still haunts me. And their absence still gnaws at my heart every morning. On that day, the house became a grave for loved ones, and I realized that the war within me never ends.

Zakaria was my companion who painted joy with his humor and cheerful spirit in every corner of the family home. Today I cry for the memories of his laughter that filled the place with warmth, and the sincerity and purity of his heart in a hollow world accustomed to cruelty. I cry for the mornings that began with his voice: “Bashasha, good morning and good morning Amir,” he’d say, using a playful linguistic flourish that made “Amir” sound like “Amirun”

I cry for his son Ali, who left too young, carrying in his eyes innocence, a beautiful soul, intelligence, and shrewdness. He had adopted his father’s walk and speech, so his features seemed like a painting drawn with Zakaria’s nobility, and I see them together in one moment, Zakaria emerging in Ali’s laughter and Ali echoing his father’s scent in every gentle movement.

May their souls rest in peace.

Unborn Child

Returning to Al-Mawasi was like crossing into a grave from which I had recently emerged. Only three days after Zakaria’s passing, new Israeli evacuation orders were issued: a line of paper leaflets dropped by planes, preceded by artillery shells painting the sky with fire. We left Ma’an under intermittent shelling, wearing only the clothes on our backs. My heart was

heavy that Zakaria—who had always balanced our decisions—was no longer here for us to consult: should we stay amidst the danger of falling stones, or choose the danger of a tent with no walls?

We arrived in Al-Mawasi at dusk, the road lined with endless rows of tents. I saw barefoot children playing with a worn cloth ball, running and laughing in a time that knew no laughter. In the streets, the sounds of charity kitchens rose: calls for food, and pots of lentil stew boiling amidst crowds of people carrying empty containers, just like their stomachs. On the other side, long queues of women and men carried plastic jerrycans, waiting for a drop of water. These were scenes journalists would often document to portray our suffering, but in my eyes and heart, they were nothing but oppression we swallowed every day.

Along with Amir's family, I moved to an old concrete room and a tent pitched between two makeshift bathrooms. I watched the crops from behind a nylon wall, reminding me of some of what life used to be like in Ma'an. Between the tent and the room, there was a narrow strip of land that we turned into a kitchen and also set up a bathroom. On the side, my mother-in-law planted seeds of arugula, mint, and parsley. The green resisted a harsh summer, as if waving a life card amidst a gray landscape.

That place witnessed our repeated tragedies; by that time, Israel had killed 93 members of our family: men, women, children, elderly, doctors, journalists, scientific figures, and dignitaries. But it was not enough. As summer drew to a close, specifically on the third Friday after our house was bombed, Israel committed a massacre against my uncles after targeting their home. Israel killed my uncle Tamim, his wife, and his three princesses: Salam, Huda, and Mays. It also killed my uncle Yahya's wife and his son Abdul Rahman.

From the First *Intifada* to the Second, and from one war to another—2007–2008, 2012, 2014, 2021, and even during the Marches of Return—the name of my family, Abu Ma'amar, has never been absent from the lists of martyrs. My family is one of Khan Younis's ancient and extended families. The family is known for its long national history, for being one of the

families that made immense sacrifices and has been and still is a witness to the crimes of the occupation to this day.

One morning, on my way to visit my grieving parents, I felt a slight dizziness. In the evening, the field doctor confirmed the news: I was pregnant. Instant joy seeped into my heart, followed by a sudden wave of fear; I placed my hand on my belly and whispered to myself: Will your eyes see the bombing before they see the light of the window?

The first weeks of pregnancy passed to a contradictory rhythm: the sounds of explosions on one side, and the rumble of my stomach reminding me of a small life forming inside.

Then came the truce in late September. An inverted bomb: it exploded with quiet. We decided to return north, to our apartment in Tal Al-Hawa. I carried a small bag, and Amir, as usual, carried the heavier load. We covered 12 kilometers on Salah al-Din Road: torn asphalt, burnt cars, punctured road signs. The chalets and resorts on the sea had been completely wiped out. As far as the eye could see, destroyed towers stood as witnesses, like those of the Prisoners' City and Al-Zahra City, only two or three of which remained. We stopped almost every kilometer; I would sit on a rubble stone or remnants of a sidewalk, Amir would check my pulse, then squeeze my hand and say: "A little more."

When we arrived, the north looked like a city of bones; towers with open ribs, and ceilings with black wires dangling like burnt intestines. We climbed what remained of the stairs to our apartment, and as soon as we reached the door, what remained of the illusion of survival vanished. There was no house, but an empty shell, a rusty cage groaning in the wind. Nothing remained of the details we had once woven except remnants hinting at nostalgia: the dining table, the beige living room sofa, the brown kitchen walls—all crushed. Only the bed remained standing amidst the rubble, worn and dusty like a disturbed tombstone.

We shared Amir's family home in Al-Shati camp: leaning walls, some open, doors with hinges torn off, but it stood firm like a stubborn old man refusing to fall. In the evening, I wandered through Gaza: Thalatheeni

Street, Firas Market, the Islamic University building where I studied for four years was now a pile of rubble; the press office where I worked had become a hole in the ground; and Al-Hurriya Hall, which we had booked for our wedding, was now just stones piled on top of each other. I felt as if the city was walking beside us without features, as if the bombing had erased its fingerprints.

The truce passed like lightning, and on the first nights of Ramadan, we woke up again to the sound of fire belts. The war had returned. Israel closed the crossings, and the war of starvation began: no flour, no fruits, no green vegetables. I returned to burning wood. Its smoke choked my airways; I fled from it, fearing for the child. I held the World Health Organization statistics in my hands: 90 percent of Gaza's 55,000 pregnant women suffered from malnutrition, and 130 of the babies born daily did not have access to sufficient incubators. I read the numbers and swallowed them like bitter pills.

By the end of the sixth month of my pregnancy, I had a fragile body; I craved a red apple as I saw in nutrition booklets, but I settled for white bread as there was no meat or healthy food in the markets. I wrote a letter to Muath—that's what I named him: My little one, I am sorry you hear bombs instead of music and eat dry bread instead of fruit. But you are the only seed of hope that the dust could not cover. I saved the message in my phone's notes, hoping he would read it someday when he learns to read.

By the eighth month, the city was peeling from within; only salt and lentils remained in the markets. Yet, every dawn, I woke to glimpse an orange glow rising above the wounded houses, telling myself: "Here, Muath will be born, and with him, something akin to light." I told Amir I wanted a name that would protect our child from evil; we chose Muath —'the protected by God.'

I am certain his birth will be another birth for the city I love. For the land that has given birth to so much blood can give birth to gardens, and the womb that has endured rubble can endure labor. When I hear the whistle of a nearby missile, I place my hand on my belly and whisper: "You will

come, Muath, with the sun in your hand, and your small body will write the green chapter after this gray one.”

A few weeks after the penning of these words, Muath, the protected by God, was born.

Lamia Othman

Embodiment of Gaza's Mission

"Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity," wrote Frantz Fanon. Amidst Gaza's protracted war of extermination, English Media student Lamia Othman immediately embraced her mission. She began teaching hundreds of children—many of them orphans—providing lessons in math and English, alongside vital instruction in hope, love for the homeland, and life itself. Her profound connection with the children, who taught her powerful lessons about loss and the sea, reveals the strength, beauty, and unyielding optimism that defines Gaza's spirit and the resilience of its newest generation.

"The School of Resilience for the Children of Martyrs and Orphans"

I WAS BORN on the knife-edge of fear, yet I chose life.

I never conceived that terror would become our shadow, settling into our homes as inescapable as our own breathing. I was born in Gaza, a city that defies comparison; a metropolis that inhales endurance where others draw air, that learns to love amidst ruin, and to smile through the perpetual ache of loss.

I was a media student, dreaming of becoming the unfiltered voice the world desperately needed to hear. Before the catastrophe, my life was a

simple rhythm of university and home, punctuated by my small job in e-marketing. Then, in 2023, the axis of my world violently shifted.

The genocide began. Shells ripped into the university, silencing lectures, turning halls to ash. I recall the day studies were suspended; I stared at my satchel, a chilling question forming: Could all my dreams vanish so utterly?

But even amid the perpetual darkness and power cuts, I refused to yield. I clawed back my education online, using an aging phone, the lessons competing with the concussive sounds of shelling that hammered the earth. I studied at night by the meager light of a small lamp, or sometimes by the desperate flicker of a candle. I fought sleep and fear in tandem, whispering my conviction:

“If our houses fall, knowledge will be the one thing that stands.”

Weeks of relentless bombardment forced us into exile. We abandoned the house where I had envisioned my graduation, carrying only essentials, my notebooks, and my phone. People huddled together in an open field, a landscape of small, hastily erected tents. This was the unplanned new phase of my life.

The tents overflowed with children, their faces pale, their eyes wide and searching for a sense of peace long since eradicated. I watched them sit, drawing their lost wishes in the sand with sticks: a house, a school, a father’s return.

One day, volunteers arrived, asking for help with educational activities. My hand shot up—a reflex. I needed to do anything to inject life back into these young souls, and, in turn, to dull the crushing weight on me of the war.

We lacked everything—books, paper, a blackboard. But necessity is the mother of creation. We forged the impossible from scraps. I gathered the children into a tight circle, writing on salvaged paper, even on discarded cardboard. Our lessons transcended mere teaching; they were lifelines to humanity.

I watched them erupt in laughter as I dramatically pronounced English words for them to mimic, and I laughed with them, a defiant act against the terror. It was there I grasped a profound truth: Education needs no walls, only a committed heart. I was teaching them language, but they were teaching me the deepest meaning of endurance—that a laugh is a form of resistance.

The days blurred, and the number of children flocking to our small, decrepit room swelled. This classroom—a survivor in a half-standing building—pulsed with irrepressible energy, defying the biting cold and the nearby explosions. We sat crammed on the broken floor, sharing a handful of notebooks, writing with tiny, precious script to maximize every available inch of paper.

I prepared lessons deep into the night. When the drone of warplanes grew close, I'd turn off my phone, clutching my few books as if they were sanctuary. I was haunted by the fear of waking up to find some of them gone forever.

Yet, an inner force transcended the fear. I started realizing these children deserved more than a tent; they deserved a genuine haven, however modest. This urgency forged the idea that became the School of Resilience—Madrasat Al-Sumoud.

My only resources were my iron will and the conviction of a few who joined me. We started building a small educational space from absolute zero. I painted a defiant banner:

The School of Resilience for the Children of Martyrs and Orphans.

It felt surreal—founding a school when everyone else was fleeing them. It was small, scarce of chairs, but its spirit was priceless. In the children's eyes, I saw an otherworldly glow. They walked great distances, their precious notebooks tied with string, rushing toward me with shouts of joy:

"Miss, what's the lesson today?"

I always returned their smile, giving them my mantra:

“We are going to learn how to live. Because anyone who can learn in the middle of a war can change the world once there is peace.”

The School of Resilience was small in structure, but vast enough to hold massive hearts. Every dawn, I was the first to arrive, arranging the simple room, wiping dust from the wooden surfaces. Every textbook was a life salvaged from the rubble.

On our official opening day, the children arrived in humble clothes, each carrying a notebook and a smile too big for their years. We sang a simple alphabet song together, their tiny voices triumphantly overriding the engine whine of warplanes overhead. That moment was a new beginning, the resurrection of hope everyone believed had been extinguished.

I taught English, but more often, I taught how to navigate life. I insisted: “Knowledge isn’t just words; it’s the tool we use to protect ourselves and rebuild our nation.” In their gaze, I saw the raw light of aspiration. Some could barely read; others had never seen a classroom. But all were famished for learning, desperate as a hungry man for bread.

I spent years volunteering, distributing aid and organizing workshops, but my footsteps always led back to my small classroom, to the children awaiting their lesson. I knew my place wasn’t behind a desk but on the ground, among those who possessed nothing but hope. We worked unpaid, without funds, creating teaching aids from mere waste: cardboard, bottle caps, and stray crayons. Despite the overwhelming odds, the school flourished. Children began trekking from distant areas just to be at the School of Resilience.

One day, I filmed a simple video on my phone. I was teaching the children, doing an activity that sparked their laughter. I posted it on my Instagram, not seeking fame, but simply to testify that Gaza was still breathing.

The clip exploded. Messages flooded in:

“Lamia, you are the face of hope!” “Gaza thrives because of you, daughter of resilience.”

Teachers from around the world reached out, asking how to help. My neighbors started contributing—notebooks, books, and volunteer teaching. This outpouring of love became my fuel. I wasn't looking for applause, but I was elated that people were reminded that goodness still existed. Even the children claimed ownership, proclaiming: "That's our School of Resilience!"—a treasured second home.

Swiftly, the community recognized the school. People called me "Teacher Lamia," and sometimes "Mother of the Orphans," a title I cherished. Each child carried a narrative, and every narrative embedded a new meaning of life in my heart. I offered them comfort, listened to their grief, and taught them that despite its brutality, life demands a relentless fight.

I told them: "If your house is lost, build one in your heart. If your father is gone, know that God remains. If you are afraid, remember you are never alone."

I went home exhausted but content. My fatigue was meaningful; my occasional tears were those of fierce pride, not surrender. I felt I was sowing small seeds in scorched earth, seeds that would inevitably bloom into a new life.

Even with the crushing pressure of war and volunteering, I was determined to continue my academic studies. I knew a true leader starts on the front lines, and that management is not a title, but a solemn obligation.

I enrolled in a Master's program in Management, balancing teaching in the morning with studying at night. I wrote research papers by lamp light, reviewing online lectures as explosions rocked the air. I had a singular goal: to learn how to build robust post-war institutions, to transform this collective agony into concrete planning that would change lives.

People asked, "Lamia, don't you ever tire? How do you juggle it all?" I'd smile and answer:

"A person who has survived this war is not afraid of exhaustion. We don't struggle to live; we live to fight for life."

Over time, I became deeply woven into the fabric of the community. People trusted me, seeking my counsel for their children. Some even named their daughters “Lamia.” Others told me I was the reason their children loved school. I’d walk down the street and hear a child call out, “Miss, lesson tomorrow?” and hear a woman’s distant blessing: “God bless you, my daughter.” That single prayer was worth more than any degree or award. I felt God’s grace moving through their hearts—that my simple actions were having a real, tangible impact.

Every child at the School of Resilience held a memory, but one face remains perpetually illuminated in my mind whenever I enter the classroom: Raja, thirteen years old, thin, with a uniquely bright sparkle in his eyes.

He worshipped the sea, seeing in it only the distant horizon and the salt spray, never the danger. Raja was always the first to arrive, clutching a small, carefully wrapped bag. I’d ask with a smile: “What have you brought today, Raja?”

He’d beam with boyish pride: “Miss, I caught two small fish yesterday!” I’d laugh, cautioning him about the dangerous shore, but he’d insist with beautiful stubbornness: “The sea is my friend, I’m not afraid. It knows me.”

Fishing was his ritual of peace amidst the chaos. In a time of devastating hunger, this child risked everything to bring his classmates two small fish every morning. He would divide them carefully, a piece for everyone, as if sharing life itself.

One day, our lesson was on hope. I asked the children to write their deepest wishes. Some wrote for a “new house,” others “to see Dad in heaven.” Raja wrote simply: “I want to build a boat and become a great fisherman.”

I asked him why a fisherman, not an engineer or doctor. He replied with innocent sincerity:

“Because a fisherman is fearless. He always confronts the sea. And I want to confront everything.”

The next day, as he left, he told me: “Miss, next time I’ll bring you three fish, not two. Wait for me, don’t be late.” His voice was vibrant with commitment; his eyes held the gleam of a promise.

But that day would never arrive.

One gray morning, as I prepared the class, I heard the children whispering. A boy timidly asked: “Miss . . . did you hear about Raja?”

I looked at him, confused. Tears welling up, he finished: “He was martyred.”

I froze, the word refusing to register. A mistake, perhaps someone else. Everything moved in agonizing slow motion. I grabbed my phone, scanning the endless casualty lists. Then I saw it:

“Child Raja—martyred following shelling near his tent.”

The phone dropped. I couldn’t breathe. I tried his family’s number, again and again—no answer. It can’t be . . . he promised me three fish. I collapsed onto the floor, weeping with a depth I hadn’t known before. I wasn’t just grieving a boy; I was grieving a shattered dream, a precious light extinguished in this long night.

Since that day, the sea has changed for me. I see it now as Raja did: a place of fierce liberty, not peril. When the sea breeze passes, I feel his spirit still there, gripping a small paddle, rowing far from the war.

The first day back in class was marked by the children’s silence. Raja’s chair stood vacant. Standing before them, fighting my tears, I said:

“Raja didn’t die. He just went ahead of us. His spirit is still here. Every time we learn, he’s watching and happy in the sky.”

The children cried, and we read a prayer for him together.

Raja taught me that loss is not an ending, but a new genesis. I thought I was his teacher, but he taught me the true meaning of resilience. Whenever exhaustion or despair threatens, I hear his voice echo in my memory: “Miss, the fisherman is not afraid.”

That sentence is my code. Every step I take, every lesson I give, every child I hold—I see a fragment of Raja. He was more than a student; he was

the mirror of every Palestinian child carrying a massive dream that grows despite the siege.

Today, as I write, two years have passed since the war began, and many months since the School of Resilience opened its doors. Hunger persists, the shelling hasn't entirely ceased, but neither have we.

Our school has expanded. We shelter dozens of children, and within its walls reside countless dreams that reject death. We now have a small library, and students write and read their stories aloud—a living declaration that life pulses here. I look at the sign: The School of Resilience for the Children of Martyrs and Orphans. I remember the start: a room, few notebooks, an unyielding heart.

War stole much but gave us something priceless: the will to survive. It taught us to conjure light from the deepest darkness, to write our own saga, rather than letting the world define us.

I am more than a teacher, more than a Master's candidate. I am a daughter of this soil, a daughter of Gaza, who taught me to be strong without hardening, compassionate without weakening. I see in every one of my students a small, vital homeland we must protect with all our love.

When I tell Raja's story, I no longer weep as I did that day. I smile and say to myself:

"You promised me three fish, and you left me an ocean of strength."

I am Lamia Hatem Othman, from Gaza. Yet, my ancestry traces back to a small coastal village, Salama, near Jaffa. Before the wars, my family lived by the sea, their days filled with the sound of the waves and the scent of salt. My grandfather and his people were renowned fishermen, sailing their small wooden al-Hasakat boats out before dawn. Salama was defined by the olive trees to the east and the sea to the west—a breath of serenity.

When my family was exiled in 1948, they carried their house keys and pictures of the sea to Gaza, believing their absence was brief. Decades passed, and generations followed. We grew up as refugees, but the sea's

call runs in our veins. Even amidst the tents and tragedy, I feel the salt of Salama in my soul. The sea that Raja loved is the same sea my family cherished long ago. Perhaps this is why I love the sea as much as I love teaching—because both are an enduring promise of freedom.

Richard Falk

Afterword

On the Eloquence of Experience: Palestinian Responses to Israeli Genocide

MY OWN modest strivings for a just world order have been intertwined in recent decades with the long struggle of the Palestinian people to attain their basic rights under international law and in accord with imperatives of justice. This struggle is carried on in the face of an Israeli campaign seeking the total dehumanizing of the Palestinian people, culminating in genocide, preceded by apartheid and accompanied by ecocide. And yet with enduring irony reading this book of reflections by Palestinian surviving witnesses has left me with strong impressions of the super- humanization of the population of Gaza. These personalized essays of the excruciating Palestinian ordeal became even more deeply etched in my mind and heart.

Despite having visited Gaza several times and being shocked by what I saw, still it wasn't until I read this manuscript that I had even the scantest appreciation of what the Gaza genocide as *a lived experience* meant. As the editors make clear genocide assumed a diversity of concrete forms, each shadowed by various severe challenges to health, serenity, security, and even sanity. This is quite aside from reporting anguishing losses among the most intimate realities of daily existence—lost and wounded loved ones, destroyed home dwellings, devastated residential neighborhoods, and targeted heritage sides. These diverse individual experiences vividly

recounted throughout this volume include deeply moving stories of heroic coping by Gaza residents under conditions of extreme deprivations of such material necessities for survival as food, water, medical supplies, and electricity. These negative aspects of Gazan life are balanced by contrarian affirmations of an unbroken will to sustain resistance in the face of grotesque daily hardships and atrocities. I have rarely encountered such a text that both appalls and inspires with equivalent intensity.

These highly individualized essays share a basic message that some years ago were brought to a wider public appreciation by a respected Palestinian civil society organization that chose as its name, "We Are Not Numbers." This name was presumably chosen to remind the world that those victimized, and resisting, are neither the "human animals" defamed by Yoav Gallant, Israel's former Minister of Defense, nor the statistical measures of death and destruction compiled by public institutions that expressed through statistics an abstract rendering of the scale and scope of Palestinian victimization. Statistical measures relied upon to impart the scale of destructive behavior have the dehumanizing side effect of treating Palestinians as lifeless beings of homogeneous identities. Another way of giving a somewhat more informative portrayal of Palestinian suffering is to report casualties as divided among children, women, seniors, and the disabled. Although concretely conveying a demographic profile of victimization, this breakdown of casualties amounts to a more detailed version of abstraction, while continuing to remain aloof from the individuation of the experience of every single Palestinian. What *Gaza Rising* contributes is an existential rendering of genocide as imparted by autobiographical storytelling as the only acceptable way to experience the unspeakable.

This way of conveying experience is of course more than a metaphor for Gazans. It amounts to a cohering tapestry of salient and diverse personal experiences, concrete existential stories of a series of richly textured lives of people subject to the lethal stresses of an ongoing genocide that has lasted over two years. As the authors gathered in this volume shared the daily realities of genocide as lived experience, memory assumes a crucial

role in mitigating what has been lost by way of devastation. Anecdotes drawn from this unfolding genocide preserve "the presence" of lost or mutilated children or of parents, family life, friendships, joyous recollections of marriages and births, and celebrating martyrs, what Abu Kan'an aptly calls "beautiful moments." At the same time, the experience of genocide is not sugar-coated by sentimentality.

Abu Kan'an describes Gaza as a unique place: "Its peculiarity lies in the fact that life in all its forms is synonymous with resistance, defiance, and uprising…This is how Gaza forged its stability." This should not be understood as conceiving of genocide as a glorious occasion of self-transcendence—which it is—nor does it suggest that in any way genocide is preferred to better memories for the past or fervent hopes for the future. As another contributor, Alve Hamadaqa, observes, the people of Gaza "all long for the rhythm of a dull, ordinary day" and "[w]e only want our 'normal.'" So while honoring the casualties of genocide as martyrs Abu Kan'an also acknowledges their lost lives: "…they all [the martyrs] had dreams and futures that Israel stole and extinguished in the blackness of one night." Yet witness the display of resistance by Soma Baroud, a Palestinian doctor, who had ample opportunities to leave Gaza and live comfortably in exile, yet chose to remain, fully aware of the constant dangers that surrounded her. She was targeted and killed by an Israeli drone in Khan Younis, in southern Gaza, exemplifying Palestinian *sumud* as well as the spirit of resistance.

Memory is light years more significant for these authors bearing witness than the more diluted forms of nostalgia that we who are blessed with "normal" lives take for granted. What makes this volume such a major contribution are its explorations of that middle ground between genocide as experience and genocide as metaphor that brings readers a deeper appreciation of all that Israel's extreme criminality seeks to destroy. There is a truth contained in the familiar folk wisdom that "a picture is worth a thousand words," but it is not the whole truth. Throughout these pages there is exhibited the more encompassing truth that "words can go further than pictures" when it comes to capturing the feelings, dreams, and hopes of those whose resilience and resistance is being abstractly reported through

various media filters to the world as tragedy and metaphor. We should not, in this digital age, neglect the blessings of language bestowed on the human species as an indispensable resource for adapting to the diverse challenges of individual and collective existence—even as we need to be vigilant in our defense of truth and opposition to manipulative state propaganda.

We can hardly imagine a companion volume of Israeli voices that affirmed genocidal violence as national security and ethnic destiny as fully justified, even if not rationalized as a reaction to "the shock and awe" of the October 7 attack inflicting 1200 deaths and the seizure of 250 hostages. The attack has been appropriated by almost all Israelis as enabling progress in achieving the Zionist goal of establishing "Greater Israel," and "finishing the job," which refers to coercing Palestinian surrender, departure, and dispossession. A Zionist vision of Jewish entitlement and Palestinian erasure, with neither empathy nor respect for legality and moral values standing in the way of this possibly last stand of settler colonialism reinforced by a self-serving ideological justification of civilizational superiority.

None of the Palestinian authors represented here bother to address directly such hypothetical Israeli "voices of conscience." Recourse to genocide is a posture that demeans and devalues dialogue. These are not two plausible sides seeking reconciliation or making an effort to understand the worldview of their adversary. These are not similar postures that should be homogenized. The enslaved seek liberation and normalcy, the enslaver seeks domination, dispossession, and exploitation.

Each instance of the Gaza genocide has an original character that is bound up with the unraveled lives of these survivor/witnesses. So too is the uniqueness of the existential encounters of each individual with their specifics of devastation, loss of home, family, even neighborhood. These, further accentuated by sadistic cruelties and atrocities that activate solidarity, unfold the range of Gazan experience in real time. Such perspectives strengthen and enrich our capacities to gain a greater understanding of the full compass of the horrifying ordeal, one that hopefully will lead to more engaged commitments toward justice-driven

outcomes in Gaza. This necessarily includes being responsive to Palestinian grievances as rooted in international law and universal moral values, as well as exploring whether a politics of reconciliation is attainable without foregoing loyalty to memories, both cherished and anguishing.

As Maphaz Yousef observes in a moment of unsurprising disillusionment with the unity of humanity, the genocide was allowed to unfold in Gaza for more than 24 months "while the world watched and did nothing." Such a heedless world for Gaza is also represented in Shaimaa Eid's indicting words, "betrayal" by a world "that silently observes." Maphaz Yousef adds "that word "genocide" follows me through my childhood…No sentence can bear the weight of that pain." And it is an almost ethical burden of survivors not to forget. In the deepest sense we too face injuries to our humanism and understanding, once we expose ourselves to the anguished stories recounted on these pages. While remembering and speaking or writing is resistance for those confined to Gaza, it is not sufficient for the rest of us, who must do more by way of action if we wish to claim authentic solidarity with the Palestinian struggle.

There is no disposition by these authors to probe more deeply this seeming global tolerance of their undisguised genocide. Obvious questions for historians will be how to reconstruct the chain of events that led so seamlessly from the late 19th Century Zionist Movement's dehumanization of Arab residents of Ottoman Palestine to the early 21st Century Israeli recourse to genocide. Should indicting blame be placed on the adoption by the Zionist movement of Israel as Jewish homeland as the only acceptable way to overcome European antisemitism? Or was the Gaza genocide of the past 27 months at least partially attributable to the geopolitics of energy, the ravages of capitalism, and the racist and exploitative character of Western Orientalism?

Throughout these arresting essays the theme of Palestinian steadfastness (*sumud*) is the antithesis of the betrayals of silence or worse on the part of the world's peoples, governments, and even the United Nations. Shaimaa Eid expresses this tension in the fraught context of love. She puts it this way: "This is the essence of love in Gaza. It does not demand poetry, but

unwavering patience." This is not "love" that we are used to under normal circumstance, and it is demanding beyond our imagination, here illustrated by the love of a wife, Asmaa, for Jameel, her deeply wounded husband. Jameel had lost speech and memory as an armed resister, deprived of all means of communicating save constantly tearing eyes, even to the point of seeming not even to recognize Asmaa. In her poignant words, love "is not proven by words, but by remaining present beside one who doesn't even recognize you."

Yet recognizing such an extremity of commitment is for Asmaa also an occasion for hope, rather than the despair of resignation and self-pity: "Jameel will return. I will make him love me anew, I will make him choose me again. This is love in the time of genocide..a profound act of creation." Such juxtaposed sentiments by survivor witnesses that capture the exceedingly painful experience of loss without overlooking the transcendent value of emotional attachments—exhibiting this extraordinary expression of hopefulness, along with abiding love—conveys the essence of Palestinian resistance to genocide.

This collection of essays that Ramzy Baroud and Ilan Pappé have creatively edited can be read as an overlooked reprisal to Israeli genocide, containing throughout the text this supplemental unspoken message: "we are not abstractions." The individual contributions have their own assertive message: "our lives are preoccupied by the concrete realities of past memories, present survival tactics and strategies, and future hopes as a blend of dreams and steadfastness." This reminder reverses former Israel Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant's intended insult contending that Palestinians are a regressive form of being, actually on a bio-ethical par with the supposedly inferior animal sisters and brothers being appropriated for human convenience

It is fitting that the essay following the one describing the touching love story of Asmaa and Jameel is entitled, "Animals in Gaza: A Story of Martyrdom and Life." Written by Rasheed Anbar in an ecologically enlightened manner, it sets forth his contra-Gallant creed: "All living being under our guardianship have the right to a dignified life and the right to be

called Palestinians, too. This land is ours and theirs." Even if Anbar's words should be somewhat discounted as the romanticized rhetoric of an unusually passionate animal lover, the mere assertion of this positive linkage can be understood as an expression of resistance and an expansion of to whom/for whom on the part of Palestinians. To include nature in the depiction of genocidal obliteration of *all that once was* precious about Gaza before it became a wasteland that most Gazan residents continue to insist on inhabiting as the alternative to ethnic cleansing—if necessary, unto death—is a persisting theme of these authors.

A further unifying feature of these distinct essays is the refusal of Palestinian self-identification to portray themselves as "victims." Their preferred word is "martyr," dignifying and giving spiritual blessing, even holy meaning to their loss. To regard physical self-sacrifice as martyrdom is a way of honoring and elevating those who have died or suffered great losses during the genocide above the carnage inflicted upon them. It recognizes this suffering of innocent civilians as an organic component of a wholistic politics of resistance under a brutal siege. The Western media (mis)reports the horrific happenings of genocide either as incidents of "war" (which it isn't) or as massive "victimization," a label that dismisses the heroic quality of Palestinian resistance and resilience, pervasive themes which the editors of *Gaza Rising* magnify by this assemblage.

What a contrast to Israeli-proclaimed "victimization" strictly limited to the captives of the October 7 attack, seeking sympathy by designating them as "hostages," with each of them individuated so as to have his or her tragic story told in humanizing detail. That term emphasizes a wrongful captivity of innocent civilians at the hands of Hamas while many were actually soldiers of an occupying power. Israeli propaganda depicts the Gazan attackers as barbaric and disregards their international legal right to resist an oppressive apartheid occupation. The acceptance of Israel's account of the treatment of the hostages by the world media stands in revealing contrast with the deadly silence in the West, including on the most influential media platforms, about the over ten thousand detained and abused Palestinians. Their dark experiences in Israeli prisons are rarely given the sort of

attention compared to the attentiveness accorded Israel prisoners' far lesser grievances. To articulate this contrast is not to deny that any abuse of any detained innocent civilians, including of the Israeli hostages, is regrettable, and warrants legal and political redress. But we must object to treating Palestinian suffering as unworthy of acknowledgement while Israeli suffering is conveyed by individuated and humanizing stories of their sustaining abuse and celebrating only their release.

It is understandable that Gazans were disillusioned by the failure of the global order to take significant action to stop the genocide, even to the extent of establishing and monitoring a permanent ceasefire. This failure will be long remembered, and yet it should not be allowed to describe the range of efforts and effects that arose from various initiatives undertaken by opponents of the genocide. To grasp these complex realities, it is essential to recognize that the UN along with the peoples of the world did not just watch the genocidal spectacle, but undertook some illuminating, potentially corrective initiatives, although not nearly robust enough under the circumstances to restrain Israel or its complicit partners and thereby facilitate Palestinian liberation.

What did happen in reaction to the Gaza genocide was not trivial and has greatly weakened Israel's soft power capabilities, relegating the country to an unwelcome status of "pariah state." This dynamic of delegitimation was brought about by a combination of juridical professionalism on the part of the ICJ and ICC, the invaluable truth-telling reports of Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on Occupied Palestine, and by UNRWA's devotion to making civilian life as bearable as possible in Gaza. In addition, the numerous expressions of populist opposition to normalizing relations with Israel have gradually obtained the upper hand in the all-important domain of symbolic politics. This includes the promotion of arms and trade embargoes, sports and cultural boycotts, self-imposed restraints on travel to and from Israel, and major continuing protest activity in many parts of the world that continues to be met by suppressive policies of most liberal democracies in the West.

It is common to recognize the concreteness of the genocidal experience of Palestinians as "unspeakable," meaning that words, by falling short, diminish the actuality of suffering. But after reading these essays I challenge this view, finding that these stories and recollections of these authors have rendered genocide "speakable," at least so far as memories and genocidal policies and practices are concerned. It is this middle ground that the written word can explore in ways that photography or mere lamentation cannot. This is integral to acknowledging and explicating the profound encroachments of genocide on various challenges to living together with dignity as a species on a planet that has become ecologically and politically fragile. Overcoming the global moral crisis posed by the Gaza genocide has become a practical necessity as well as a spiritual ideal. What this book bears witness to is the direct linkages between the specifics of genocide and the generality of species survival as refracted through the Gaza experience—not only after October 7, but clearly going back to the *Nakba* of 1948, or even further to the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

It is long past time, but never too late, to realign the Palestinian experience with a fulfillment of the requirements of law, justice, and morality. Although neither the contributors nor the editors make such a plea explicitly, all who read these essays should feel motivated to act in solidarity with the Palestinian resistance struggle against one of the cruelest modern versions of settler colonialism.

Ahmet Davutoğlu

Coda

What Gaza Has Taught Us

READING the firsthand accounts in this volume, testimonies bearing witness to the genocide in Gaza, I was profoundly shaken. I found myself compelled to re-examine, at their very foundations, my perceptions of the three core dimensions that shape ontological existence: space, time, and the human being.

First, space: the Gaza Strip. A strip by name, small, narrow. On maps that expand outward, it gradually shrinks, becoming almost invisible to the naked eye. Yet for the past two and a half years, it has deepened into an ocean vast enough to engulf all of humanity.

By invoking the dual meaning of the word *"strip,"* one may articulate this painful reality in the language of Shakespeare: *In the Gaza Strip, Shakespeare's storm returns. "Strip yourself to bare your bosom,"* cries King Lear, and a land stripped of law and mercy forces the world to confront what power looks like when humanity stands unaccommodated.

Indeed, as Abu Kanan writes in *Gaza's Beautiful Mornings*, Gaza is a *"special creation,"* unlike any other place. It is a space where humanity is stripped of all identities and statuses. Some, as they were stripped along with the Gaza Strip, rediscovered the hearts within their exposed bosoms; others were stripped even of their hearts, transforming into savage creatures.

As Hani Al-Salmi writes with striking clarity in *Diary of Genocide: "In Gaza we exist between the poles of death and life. Death is like a yellow bulldozer devouring everything, and life is a simple man smiling in the face of oppression. From this duality, I draw my inspiration."* In truth, humanity itself has been stripped bare through Gaza, revealing a global duality: those who still carry a heart within their bosom, and those who have reduced the heart to a mere mechanical casing, pumping blood without feeling.

While reading these life stories, a historical flow of time unfolded before my eyes through places themselves. As I read Munia Jamal's account in *Guilt Like No Other* of her grandparents' forced displacement from Ashkelon to the Al-Shuja'iyya neighborhood, my mind traveled back to history: to Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi's humane decision in 1190, after liberating Jerusalem from the Crusaders, to allow the Jews from Ashkelon to settle in Jerusalem and build a synagogue; and then forward to 1948, to the ethnic cleansing that unfolded in the same land. Claiming descent from those Ashkelon Jews brought to Jerusalem by Salah al-Din, Zionist forces occupied Ashkelon on 5 November 1948, now an all-Muslim and Christian Palestinian city of around ten thousand people, which, according to the UN Partition Plan, was to remain Palestinian, and expelled all its inhabitants, including Munia Jamal's grandparents. Those driven to Gaza lived for generations with the dream of returning to their homes and lands just thirteen kilometers away. For them, Gaza was not a place to be abandoned, but a homeland from which, when they looked northward, they could still feel the wind blowing from Ashkelon.

When I read the passages describing *Al-Shuja'iyya*, a memory from my own experience resurfaced vividly. During the 2014 war, while I was working on ceasefire efforts as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, Israeli attacks were heavily concentrated in the Al-Shuja'iyya area. In one meeting, I asked the Gazans with whom I was consulting about ceasefire why the neighborhood was called Al-Shuja'iyya (the place of bravery). They did not know. When I explained that this was the hill where Gazans, together with the last Ottoman soldiers, had resisted the British colonial army in 1917, fighting until the last soldier was martyred, and that once this

hill fell, Jerusalem too fell, they were deeply moved. It was for this reason, I told them, that Gazans had named the area Al-Shuja'iyya.

Even places become heroic through heroes; history repeats itself through space. And today, Al-Shuja'iyya is no longer merely a historical term used to describe resistance to colonialism. Gaza, in its entirety, with every neighborhood, every corner, every stone, and every grain of sand, is Al-Shuja'iyya.

In short, Gaza is not the name of a small strip of land; it is a place where history is shaped, where humanity itself is tested.

When I read Reem Alaa Hamadaqa's life story, "*Lest the Planes See Us,"* I felt with profound intensity the existential dilemma faced by every Gazan: to become a martyr, or to be left behind. As she writes with devastating clarity: *"That night, Israel stole the core of my life and snuffed out the light in my eyes. My dearest ones were taken away from me. An Israeli airstrike obliterated fourteen members of my family: my mother, father, two sisters, my grandmother, my sister's children, and my uncle's entire family, except for two. They were taken away from me. I was left behind, stamped with the cruel title: sole survivor."*

To be a sole survivor is to carry an unbearable moral and emotional burden upon one's shoulders. Those martyred in genocide do not see the dawn; yet the one left behind, as Reem Alaa confesses, comes to despise both dawn and the rising sun: *"For the first time in my life, I hated the dawn."*

Shakespeare's *"To be, or not to be"* is a meditation on existence freely questioned; in Gaza, that freedom has vanished. The question is no longer whether life is worth enduring, but whether life will be permitted at all. Here, *to be* means only to survive, often more painful than death itself, because survival comes stripped of family, memory, and the human bonds that give life meaning. To live on after parents, children, and siblings are erased is not survival, but a prolonged wound. What was once an inner philosophical dilemma has become an external verdict imposed by force: to

die, or to survive—if survival is still allowed. Hamlet asked his question of himself; Gaza poses its question to the world.

In Shakespeare, existence is questioned. In Gaza, existence is sentenced. Indeed, as Munia Jamal asks with searing clarity in *Guilt Like No Other*, for a Gazan, existence itself comes to be treated as a crime: *"Can a person be held to account for their very existence?"*

To exist is to remember oneself. In her life story entitled *"Love in the Time of Genocide,"* Shaimaa Eid recounts Asmaa's effort to restore the memory of her husband Jamal, who lost his memory because of an Israeli attack. Through her love, Asmaa seeks to return Jamal not only to himself but to existence itself, adding a dimension to both being and love that remains utterly inaccessible to the declarations of love staged in luxurious halls and privileged settings. As she says: *"Not just belief, but absolute conviction. Jameel will return. I will make him love me anew, I will make him choose me again. This is love in the time of genocide. No luxury, no indulgence. But a profound act of creation."*

Love is a force before which both Israel's war machines and Israeli Defense Minister Gallant who arrogantly and hubristically declared, "we will destroy everything," ultimately stand powerless. Love is the fortress Asmaa has patiently woven to defend Jamal's memory who lost it due to an injury in an Israeli attack. This love is the human manifestation of Gaza's living memory, embodied in Gazans' profound attachment to their soil and their unwavering will to live upon it – one that Trump sought to erase by reimagining the land as a vacation resort. Gaza is a land where true love is tested: not merely the love of bodies, but the love of souls. As one testimony captures it poignantly: *"This is the essence of love in Gaza. It does not demand poetry; it demands unwavering patience. It is not measured by gifts, but by tears secretly wiped away. It is not proven by words, but by remaining present beside one who does not even recognize you."*

From these stories, I learned with profound sorrow that every emotion we thought we understood is lived under genocide more intimately, more

authentically, and with unbearable intensity. The efforts of Bashaer Abu Ma'amar to protect her unborn son Muath, and of Asia al-Masouabi to keep her daughter Alaa alive after losing their fathers to Israeli attacks, reveal that motherhood is more powerful than a nuclear bomb.

Asia al-Masouabi's anguished lament, *"If Only I Had Wings,"* could not prevent Alaa's death a few months later. Yet Alaa's very existence bound her mother and siblings to life; the struggle to keep her daughter alive became the means by which the mother, herself, held on to existence. Meanwhile, the words Bashaer Abu Ma'amar whispered to her unborn son, Muath, whom she regarded as *"Protected by God,"* as she placed her hand upon her womb, continue to wait for the day of their fulfillment: *"You will come, Muath, with the sun in your hand, and your small body will write the green chapter after this gray one."*

The mention of al-Shifa Hospital by Bashaer Abu Ma'amar immediately carried me back to a painful memory of father– daughter love. During the 2012 war, on 20 November 2012, when I visited Gaza in my capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs, I went to al-Shifa Hospital while the Israeli bombardment was still ongoing, accompanied by my wife, who is a physician. As she tended to the wounded, I witnessed a father clinging to the lifeless body of his young daughter, lying on the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. I bent down and embraced him; upon seeing me, he rested his head on my shoulder and wept for a long time. I had a daughter of similar age, and in that moment, I found myself spiritually identifying with him. It was then that I felt, with piercing clarity, how profoundly different the meanings of motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood are for the people of Gaza.

Later, in an effort to offer some measure of consolation, I brought the father of the martyred Yusra, Besim al-Shewa, and her wounded mother, Muna, to Türkiye and hosted them in my home together with my wife. He gifted me a copy of the Qur'an that his daughter had read; it remains among my most precious spiritual keepsakes. From what I lived through that night in Gaza, I know that the reality experienced there cannot truly be conveyed, nor fully comprehended, by words alone.

Genocide, the product of a savage injustice, is egalitarian only in its capacity for destruction: humans, animals, plants, buildings, and streets all endure this devastation together. The olive trees mentioned in almost every life story, and the animals that Rasheed Anbar struggles to protect under genocidal conditions in *Animals in Gaza: A Story of Martyrdom and Life*, shared the same fate.

While Gallant addressed the people of Gaza in a fully racist and fascistic language, calling them "human animals," he remained ignorant of a fundamental truth: Gazans relate to the animals of Gaza with the same existential care and affection. They regard their lives as sacred as their own. As it is powerfully expressed by Rasheed Anbar: *"We must treat animals with respect in their lives, and protect them from all kinds of violence, torture, and harm. It follows that we should also consider all the animals massacred by the occupation as martyrs and say Allah yirhamhum (may God accept them), as we do with humans, knowing that these living beings are as sacred as we are."*

Gaza is not the story of those who bow to genocide or of those who remain silent in its face; it is the epic of those who resist genocide and of those who, fully aware that they may be martyred, nevertheless return to their land to serve their people despite it.

In *That Familiar Word*, Maphaz Ahmad Yousef recounts how, on 7 October, he pleaded with his father who was in Egypt not to return to Gaza. Yet on 9 October, fully conscious that he was returning to the midst of a vast genocide, his father's response reflected the Palestinians' epic devotion to their land and their people: *"I have spent half of my life outside Palestine. Now, when my people need me most, I must be here. If I am to die, let it be on this land. I want to be buried next to my mother and my brother, Ashraf."*

As Amna Shabana conveys with deep conviction in *The Path Meant for Us*, genocide may strip people of their right to live and of their capacity to act freely, yet it cannot deprive them of the will to choose how they will die. As she writes: *"In our five months in Khan Younis, I frequently made*

my way to Al-Aqsa Roundabout, the closest place outside the camp with a potential internet connection. My brothers tried to prevent me from going out, fearing the dangers, but my heart insisted: If we do not choose our lives, we will choose the form of our death, to die while trying."

Walking toward death with such determination, by a path and method she herself chose, Dr. Soma Baroud (Why I Came Back) stands as a symbol of the meaningful bridge Gazans have built between life and death. Guided by the consciousness she inherited from her father who taught her, *"We have nothing left but our education. It is our weapon, and our pride"* Dr. Soma wielded her medical profession as a dignified weapon against genocide. On 9 October 2024, she was martyred when an Israeli drone struck her car as she was returning from the hospital.

Her words remain a written embodiment of an unshakable will in the face of genocide: *"Yet I did not leave. I walked to the hospital and back to my makeshift sleeping spot every day. Although I could not articulate this to anyone but myself, I knew with unwavering certainty precisely why I had returned to Gaza, and why I would never leave again."*

Dr. Soma became eternal as a martyr in the soil of Gaza; to those who remain, there is now the duty to cry out with an even stronger voice: "سنبقى" ***We shall remain.***

As Shaimaa Eid reminds us, *"the story is not finished, because war kills the body, but we rebuild the soul."* Trump's fantasies and Netanyahu's brutal designs will be consigned to the dustbin of history, while the human spirit and dignity embedded in the space of Gaza will one day become a source of inspiration, not only for the freedom of Palestinians, but for the liberation of all humanity.

There is a widespread illusion that history is written solely by the powerful oppressors. While this judgment may at times appear convincing, history is more often redirected by the oppressed, by those who embody what may be called *the power of powerlessness*. Those who rule not through weapons but through conscience, who speak not to dominant international media but directly to human hearts, and who exercise strategic

patience under conditions of extreme injustice, have repeatedly altered the course of history.

In the Palestinian lexicon, this strategic patience is called sumud, steadfastness. Viewed through this lens, the historical bond Nelson Mandela forged between South Africa and Palestine acquires even deeper meaning today. Mandela, who defeated white racism not with arms but with principled endurance after years of confinement, once declared: *"South Africa will not be truly free until Palestine is free."*

After the genocide in Gaza, this bond has expanded to encompass all of humanity: Until Palestine is free, freedom will not be fully realized anywhere in the world. Gaza has revealed this truth with devastating clarity.

Many may believe that Gaza is the one in need of assistance. In reality, it is humanity that needs Gaza, to relearn the meaning of space, of time, and of human dignity.

Those who arrogantly presume to decide the future of Gazans should not forget this: the children of genocide, armed with the consciousness of *sumud*, are capable of breaking every mold imposed upon them. Through their struggle against genocide, Gazans have endowed anew the three foundational pillars of ontological existence, space, time, and the human being. They are not passive objects of history, but its dignified subjects and agents.

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